

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a sad book. It is the story of a small boy, with only a week or two to live, who is brought home and given one last "Christmas" party. But the story is told with such rare understanding: the reactions of the many different characters involved are so well drawn: the tale unfolded with such compassion: that any reader, though his heart will surely be touched, will remember for a long time—and with gladness—the warmth and kindness which made Jamey's last day the "best Christmas never".

Christmas comes but
once a year

JOHN FRANKLIN BARDIN



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To my Daughter and Son
JUDITH & FRANKLIN

Chapter 1

JAMEY awoke for the last time in the land of the elephants. Joy, like a tiny pain that did not really hurt, kept him company. The land was already grey with morning. The elephants were all in their cages. Jamey felt safe and glad.

As a good elephant should, he sat up carefully in his cage. The bedclothes stayed tight around his knees. Jamey had to be good this morning. The doctor and Nurse Clark—and even Nurse Evans—had said he could go home today, all the way home to stay, all the way home for Christmas, if he was sure to be a good boy. His back ached, but that was all right. His back usually ached now, and his arms and legs, and his middle. If they hurt too much, he was to ask for an injection.

Jamey put his hand over his eye. He peered under it at the next cage far across the jungle. The biggest elephant in the whole world was in that cage. Jamey had seen the big elephant moving about, waking up, in the grey light. Jamey pursed his lips and trumpeted deeply, but quietly, in his throat.

Then he called, "Billy—Billy, are you waked up?"

The biggest elephant in the world rolled over and whistled between his teeth, but softly so that Nurse Evans could not hear. "You bet I am," he said. "I've been awake a long time keeping guard over you. You never know when a hunter will come to the water-hole. Somebody has to look out."

Just then Jamey had to throw the covers over his head. A searchlight from a boat passing by on the river outside the window had thrust its beam into the room. Jamey

knew it was a searchlight, that the men who operated it were not looking for him; but he was scared all the same.

This time the light was not as bright as it sometimes was. It went out quickly. Jamey stuck his head out from under the covers.

The biggest elephant was laughing at him. Some of the other elephants were waking up, too. "You are still scared of everything, aren't you, Jamey?" the biggest elephant asked.

Jamey sat up again, slowly, so that the covers did not slip off. "Of course I'm not afraid." He thought about what he had said. He had to be a good boy today; he had to tell the truth to everybody. But he did not want to admit he was afraid. Did everybody include Billy Adams?

Billy trumpeted loudly. He was good at trumpeting, sounding more like a real elephant than any of them. In the other cages, now more clearly iron hospital beds as the cloudy morning-light seeped through the river fog and stained the room, great thrashings about under covers could be seen. All the elephants were waking up. Trumpetings, some shrill, some hoarse, echoed in the room. Only one of them did not try to trumpet. This one was Sally, who was only three and had to lie very still all the time. Sally was too young to know she was an elephant.

"Jamey?"

"Yes."

"Why are you so afraid of things?"

Jamey wanted to insist he was not afraid. He liked the biggest elephant very much and he did not want him to know he was ever afraid of anything. But he had to be good today if he was to go home for the best Christmas never. And being good meant he had to tell everybody the truth.

"Jamey?"

"Yes."

"Why were you afraid of that light?"

"I thought it was Nurse Evans looking for me," Jamey said.

The biggest elephant trumpeted. "I don't blame you," he said. "Nobody likes *her*. Nurse Clark doesn't like her, I bet. Dr. Bray doesn't like her. I bet even your mother and father and my mother and father don't like her."

Billy trumpeted once more. This time he trumpeted very loudly indeed, exactly like the real elephant Jamey had heard at the circus last summer. "Anyway, she is a Snoop."

Jamey had told only part of the truth. When he first came to the hospital, the lights from the river and all the noises in the corridor kept him awake and scared. The next night they started giving him the injections, but every time Jamey woke up, the lights and the noises were there. He felt as if someone were looking for him all the time, and he did not want to be found.

Jamey would have been glad if there had not been any lights and noises in the jungle, but there they were. Now it was too late for anything to change. If anything changed, then everything could change, and he might not be able to go all the way home for Christmas. Everything had to stay the same, even the noises.

"You are afraid of the Snoop." Billy stood up in his crib and began to dance around. Billy did not care what Nurse Evans said. It was Billy who had first called the night nurse the Snoop, and he really was not afraid of her at all.

Jamey was not really afraid of Nurse Evans, either. If you lay still when she woke you up, a great, rustling, poking shadow that hovered above you and made breathy noises between her teeth, even the injections would not hurt.

Only that first time had Jamey been afraid of her. But

he was afraid of the noises and lights then, afraid of being alone. He was lying awake, feeling the funny ache all over him—like the ache that came from holding an ice cube in your hand too long. He was thinking of his mommy and crying. He was being a baby.

Sometimes the lights left the room and it would seem almost quiet. The dark was not really quiet, though. There was a rumble, and a tiny sound far-away, like a tricycle bell. There was a smell, a bad smell, that was as frightening as the noises. People kept walking by somewhere, talking in hushed voices.

One moment it was dark, and the next there was a light in Jamey's eyes so he could not see. Then the light was not there, had jerked away until it was like a little star dancing at the foot of his bed. A rustly big thing leaned over him, breathing heavily. "Now you be quiet and it won't hurt."

Jamey just had time to grab hard on to the bars of the crib. He arched his back the way he had learned and bit down until his teeth ached.

"I can't give you a shot like that," the breathy voice said. "It's the middle of the night, and I simply don't have the time."

The shadowy presence creaked and cracked starchily. Firm hands grasped him, turned him over, gave him the injection. Jamey wanted to cry.

It was then that he first saw the biggest elephant in the whole world. Jamey turned over on his side, because he seemed to ache less that way. There was a big, grey, heaving bulk right across from him, rubbing up against the bars of its cage. Jamey knew it was an elephant, just like the elephant he had seen at the circus with his father. A real elephant with a long trunk that asked for a peanut, blood-red eyes and a mouth like a toothless old man—Jamey liked elephants just fine.

"Want a peanut?" Jamey asked the elephant.

"Sure," the elephant said, heaving once more and showing a pale face with large blue eyes and a tangled mop of curly hair. "Where'd you get them? Better not let the Snoop know you have them."

"I don't have any."

"You don't?" The elephant was disappointed. "Why'd you say you had?"

"I'll get some peanuts," Jamey said. "I like you. You are the biggest elephant in the whole world, and the nicest."

Billy smiled and disappeared under his covers, hunching up, making himself a tremendous big elephant. His voice was muffled underneath the sheets and blanket. "It's a funny game," he said. "I like it. But if we are going to play it, you'll have to be an elephant, too."

"All right," Jamey said. He was not sure he knew how to be an elephant.

"You are, too, afraid," Billy was saying. "You're afraid of Nurse Evans and afraid of the lights, because you think Nurse Evans is coming with her flashlight." The other children in the room were making a lot of noise, and Billy had to shout. The boy with the broken leg who had to lie with his foot up in the air and who could never turn over—who had to be a sleeping elephant because he could not stand up in his cage—was beating against the side of his crib, causing a loud drumming. Robin and Jackie, on the other side of the ward, were jumping up and down on their mattresses. They were holding their arms out stiffly and making believe their arms were trunks. Only Sally was still. She hardly ever moved.

"I know it isn't Nurse Evans with her flashlight," Jamey insisted. "It isn't any one thing. You know that. I tell you every morning."

Billy shook his head at his friend's stubbornness. "The river, the East River, my father says, is right outside our windows. If they let you up to walk, you could go over and see. All day long—and all night, too—there are boats passing by. Some of them are pretty big boats, you bet."

"It is so a light, I know. It's not a boat."

"Aah—you're stupid. Nobody can tell you anything. All you see is the lights on the boats, like headlights on automobiles." Billy was disgusted. "Don't you know any better?"

Jamey wondered if he had to tell the truth this time. When it was daylight, he knew there were boats outside the windows. He could hear their moaning whistles; he heard them at night, too. During the day he knew Billy was right and that there was nothing to fear, but at night it was different. Then he forgot what Billy said. He lay quietly in his bed and waited for the scary lights and noises to come, afraid each time he saw the lights that this was the time that they would find him, that this time would be the last.

Billy was hidden under the blankets again, playing the elephant game. Jamey was tired of the game. He was going all the way home today. Dr. Bray and Nurse Clark had told him so yesterday afternoon. They had wheeled him down the hall to the examining-room, and they had poked him and prodded him and made him lie still under the great big black ray thing that buzzed. Other doctors came and looked at him. They stood and talked with Dr. Bray, their voices low so he could not hear. Nurse Clark held his hand and smiled at him. Every so often she brushed her own hand across her face, as if her hair kept falling in her eyes, only it did not. Nurse Clark kept her hair tucked under her starched cap so that it could never fall into her eyes.

Then she told him. "Would you like to go home for Christmas, Jamey?" she asked.

Jamey was not thinking about Christmas. He only thought about it sometimes, because it was always such a long way off. But he remembered that mommy, that morning, had asked him the same question.

"Could I?"

"You'll have to ask your mother," Nurse Clark said, "and Dr. Bray."

But Jamey knew that he *could*.

"I'm going home for Christmas today if I'm good," Jamey told Billy, who had finally come out from under his covers and was sitting cross-legged picking at his toes.

"It isn't time for Christmas yet," Billy said. He was too interested in his toes to pay much attention.

"It is so time for Christmas," Jamey said. "Mommy told me it was, and Nurse Clark, and Dr. Bray."

Billy allowed himself to become distracted. "They always tell me when it's nearly Christmas," he said, "so I can count on my fingers." He held up a hand and began to lay down one finger after another.

"They forgot to tell you this time," Jamey said with authority.

"You think they did?" Billy looked at both his hands, snicking off the fingers one by one. "It couldn't be that near."

"It is so," Jamey said.

They both stopped talking and listened. A sound of heavy footsteps came from the hall.

"Why don't you ask Nurse Evans?" Billy asked. "She'll know. She always knows everything."

Jamey did not want to ask Nurse Evans about Christmas. He knew that she would tell him exactly the truth,

and nothing else. Usually, Jamey liked people to tell him only the truth, but not always.

He was remembering what he had heard Dr. Bray tell mommy and dad outside the examining-room yesterday. Jamey was on the examining-table and Nurse Clark was with him, holding his hand. He liked Nurse Clark to hold his hand; she was so gentle and she felt so warm and good.

Jamey kept expecting them to wheel him back, but he lay there a long time, listening to the voices out in the hall behind the nearly closed door.

He knew those voices. One of them was Dr. Bray's, and another voice was his dad's, and the other was his own mommy's. He did not hear all that they were saying, but then he was not listening. He felt sleepy and good with Nurse Clark holding his hand. He felt like taking a nap before dinner.

His mother sounded worried and excited. "But he is such a little boy. Can't he have one more Christmas?"

His father said something then, but Jamey did not understand it. His father's voice was lower, not excited, as if he was saying no to mommy.

Dr. Bray said, "I've told you before it is a person alci-sion. In an unfortunate case like yours, there is no right-orwrong. A few days, possibly a week, one way or the other——" The doctor went on talking, but Jamey was not able to make out the rest he said.

Mommy began to laugh. Jamey loved to hear his mommy laugh, her voice like the tiny bells that hung on the big Christmas tree last year. But Jamey heard only a few of her words, they were all so run together. "Oh, it's got to be a good Christmas . . . it's simply got to be . . . the best Christmas never. . . ."

Jamey's bed was nearest the door, and Nurse Evans came to wash him up first. She reached into the crib and

pulled back the covers, then she took off his night-shirt. "You've perspired so all over the sheet I'll have to change you—completely change you."

Jamey lay still and did not answer. She was wiping his face with a damp wash-cloth. "I hear they are letting you go home today," she said.

"I'm going home for Christmas," James said.

"If you ask me, it's a mistake," Nurse Evans said. "A child in your condition requires constant attention. I only hope that your mother won't live to regret it."

Nurse Evans pulled him over and began to rub alcohol on to his back. Jamey turned his head so that he could see Billy. He winked at him, and Billy winked back.

The nurse helped him into a clean night-shirt, plumped up his pillow, and adjusted the back support. She handed him the toothbrush and the basin. "Be sure you clean them good," she said.

Jamey did not like the taste of the hospital toothpaste. As soon as he could, he rinsed his mouth from the glass of water Nurse Evans handed him.

The large woman stood back and looked at him, her hands on her hips. She smiled briefly. "Your hair could do with a comb. Mustn't let your mother think we mistreated you here, when she comes to take you away."

She wet his hair and began to comb it over his eyes. She spent a long time combing his hair, the tip of her tongue caught between her teeth.

"Now, let's see, that's all for you, isn't it?" The nurse was holding the board that hung from the foot of Jamey's crib, studying the chart. "You don't get another injection until eight, and you aren't down for any tests. I wonder if your mother knows what she is letting herself in for, having to give you all those injections?"

Jamey knew the night nurse was only talking to herself now and he did not have to answer. He was tempted to

ask her if she knew how long it would be before Christmas, although he knew he had better not. Soon Nurse Clark would come on duty. He would ask her.

Nurse Evans went across the ward to tidy up the boy with the broken leg. Billy rapped softly on the side of his crib. "Did you ask her?" He raised his head and pretended to trumpet. "Did she tell you how long it is before Christmas?"

Jamey shook his head and rolled over on to his side. He did not want to talk with the biggest elephant just then. He wanted to be by himself and to think.

He made believe he had gone to sleep. It was always easier to remember about Christmas when he shut his eyes and let himself sink down into the quiet place where he was all alone and safe. Sometimes he could do it, but not every time. He knew it was going to be all right as soon as he began to feel as if he were swaying, as if the crib were moving gently to and fro.

Jamey was remembering that night a long, long time ago, the night that he had not wanted to sleep. He could feel his mommy's presence near him and hear her quiet laugh. "Why, Jamey, what is the matter? I thought you had gone to the land of dreams ages ago?"

He could see the bright shaft of light as his father entered his room. "What sort of foolishness is this, young man?" his dad asked. A strong hand rumped his hair. "You aren't waiting up to see Santa Claus, by any chance?"

His mother chuckled, soft and near. "Don't tease him, Bob. It's a child's right to be disobedient tonight of all nights. After all, Christmas comes but once a year."

Jamey's eyes opened against his will. He was aware that the ache in his back had grown keener. He could still see faintly the bright line of light from the partly-

opened door, smell the exciting odour that was new in the house that night, that had not been there when his mother put him to bed, that had entered the house suddenly soon after the light went out in his room—the scent of the Christmas tree.

But Jamey was once again in the hospital ward, hearing the noise the other children were making as they waited for their breakfasts. "Christmas comes but once a year," he said to himself. He did not quite know what the words meant, but thinking of them worried him.

No, it was not thinking of Christmas comes but once a year that worried him, that was only part of it. The rest of it was what Dr. Bray had been telling mommy and dad while Jamey lay under the great big black ray thing. But he did not want to think about that part of it; he did not want the biggest elephant to see him crying.

Jamey sat up slowly in his hospital crib and smiled, although he was still worried. He could hear Dr. Bray's voice just as clearly as if the doctor were near him right then. "It's a person alcision," Dr. Bray had told mommy. "In an unfortunate case like yours, there is no rightor-wrong . . ."

A loud, shrill sound came from the next crib. Billy, the biggest elephant, had trumpeted. Jamey looked at him. "What are you doing?" Billy asked.

"I was thinking about my mommy," Jamey said.

"I know a good game," Billy said.

"I don't want to play a game," Jamey said. "I'm worried about my mommy. There is something rightor-wrong with her."

"You mean she is sick?" Billy asked. "That's too bad." His tone was sympathetic. "Is that why they are taking you home for Christmas today—because your mommy is sick?"

Jamey had not until then thought of his mommy as

being actually sick. But the doctor had been talking to her. And doctors only talked to you if you were sick, didn't they?

"I'm glad my mommy isn't sick," Billy said.

Jamey lay back on his mattress, lay as quietly as he could.

Chapter 2

MARILYN CLARK was late. She was supposed to relieve old Evans at a quarter to eight, and here it was a few minutes past eight and she was still in the locker room, had not even checked in at the superintendent of nurses' office yet. Evans would be fit to be tied. Marilyn stuck out her tongue at her own comely, slightly flushed face, reflected in the vanity mirror she had fastened to the inside of the locker door with adhesive tape.

She ran up the iron stairs from the basement to the first floor to avoid waiting for the elevator and peered into the superintendent's suite to make sure the administration staff were busy gossiping over their morning coffee and would not notice her, before taking a glance at the card files. She found her card and punched it—how many mornings this pay period had she been late?

"Miss Clark! Could we chat with you for a moment?"

Marilyn turned, and remembered to smile. Both the day and the night superintendents, Miss Butterfield and Mrs. Slocum, had put down their coffee-cups and were regarding her. She patted her blond hair to make sure it was neat and glanced quickly at the closures of her uniform to be certain no zipper had come undone. She was in for it this time.

"Won't you have a cup of coffee?" Miss Butterfield asked. She was a woman nearing fifty who retained the youthful, ward-hardened elegance that was one of the two acceptable miens for hospital brass; Mrs. Slocum exemplified the other manner, a wholesome, shoulder-

slumping dowdiness that was only a disarming overlay upon a pernicky, trap-setting mind.

Butterfield could be a sport, but never Slocum; yet Butterfield seldom had to be agreeable because she was so frightening, while Slocum's appearance of easy-going good nature invited confidences and oversights. They worked well as a team.

Marilyn decided to brazen it out. "I'm already late; I'd better not."

"Go ahead, Miss Clark," Mrs. Slocum said in her friendliest voice. "You can make it up to Nurse Evans some other morning. And we do have something to talk over."

Marilyn swallowed hard, sat upon one of the wicker chairs borrowed from the visitors' lounge and reached for a cup.

"I don't want to sound mysterious, Marilyn," Miss Butterfield said, "but this is a situation for which we have no precedent, none at all, here at New York Centre."

"The parents of the Lewis boy have a serious problem," Mrs. Slocum said. "You know about his prognosis and that he has had a remission; Dr. Bray thinks he may have another month or so of life."

Marilyn nodded her head. "A remission in this disease means that the patient enjoys a brief period of almost complete recovery—isn't that right?" she asked.

Miss Butterfield agreed. "The symptoms abate almost entirely and the patient appears to be convalescent, if not already recovered. Unfortunately, the symptoms return inevitably, and the patient dies."

Mrs. Slocum smiled. "It is simply marvellous the way we can keep them alive these days. Why, when I was a charge nurse that child would have been gone inside a few weeks—and he entered the hospital last August and here it is nearly the end of ~~October~~!"

Slocum was being her cosiest. Marilyn sipped her coffee and watched her with added suspicion. "He is a sweet little boy," she said. "It's a horrible thing to happen to such a nice little boy."

Butterfield blanched to exactly the appropriate degree. "One can't let oneself think too much about the personal side of it. And that is part of what is so difficult in asking you——"

Slocum took over. "The mother and father won't be able to manage it alone. We've talked it over with social service, and everybody agrees that if the parents can't arrange for a private nurse, someone to take over at night, why, we can't let the patient leave the hospital."

Marilyn was angry. "But they've told him. He heard the doctor talking with his parents. He keeps saying that he is going home for Christmas——"

"As we understand it, Marilyn, it is exceedingly dubious that the patient will survive until the end of December," Miss Butterfield said.

"I know—but they are planning some sort of a celebration, aren't they?" Marilyn Clark asked. "He doesn't know about dates and seasons; he is only a baby. He isn't five yet."

"That is a matter for the parents to decide," Butterfield said. "It is for the hospital to say whether the child needs home-nursing care or not."

"They could always sign him out against advice," Marilyn said.

"And if there were some emergency need for readmission?" Mrs. Slocum asked.

Marilyn finished her coffee. She checked her watch—twenty past. Nurse Evans would be enraged, positively mad with fury. "I do have to go."

"Would you care for such an assignment?" Mrs.

Slocum asked. "We understand the child likes you. It would be unusual experience."

Only by being business-like could Marilyn hold together her emotions. "At private rates," she said, "and with the assurance I am to have my old floor back, when—when——"

The superintendents regarded each other. "We shall see what can be arranged," said Miss Butterfield.

Marilyn decided to wait for the elevator. A glance at her watch had told her that it was after eight-thirty; a few more minutes' delay would not matter. Evans would just have to be angry, that was all.

She did not see how she could refuse to help with Jamey at his home. The only risk to her career was that she might lose her position as head nurse of pediatrics; but since the administration was making this unusual request of her, they would also have the responsibility of finding her as good a place on the staff. Marilyn had not yet attempted to calculate how much extra salary she would earn, but it would be plenty.

Jamey's small head and dark, burning eyes appeared before her. Whenever she was in his ward, those eyes followed her wherever she went, were never off her for a moment. She could feel his small, moist hand resting softly, confidently on her own yesterday in the X-ray room while she had tried to distract him from the conversation Dr. Bray was having with his parents in the corridor. If she had only noticed that the door had been left ajar before the doctor had begun to talk! Marilyn hoped that Jamey had not understood what they were saying, but she had glimpsed that far-off stare in his eyes, and she was afraid that he had, in his own way, learned some of his fate.

The elevator door opened and Marilyn stepped inside,

still thinking of Jamey. Had she been right to tell him he was going home for Christmas? She had heard his mother say more than once that they intended to give him one more Christmas. At that moment, when Marilyn had felt Jamey's fright—when she had feared that for the first time he was becoming aware of what had to happen to him—she would have promised him anything, anything in the world. She sucked in her breath. I don't care, she thought, if what I did was wrong. I had to do it. Someone had to do something then—not later, but right then. Someone had to promise him something.

Jamey Lewis was sitting up in his crib, gravely watching the door to the ward, when at a few minutes past nine Marilyn Clark came in with medications. She put her tray down upon the table beside his crib and began to prepare the hypodermic.

"Good morning, Jamey. I'm awfully late this morning. And none of you have had breakfast yet, have you?"

Billy, who had been listening, now stood on his head in his bed, making his sheet flap. "I'm so hungry I could eat an elephant—two elephants."

"Well, you will all have to wait until Jamey has his injection," the young nurse said.

"Miss Clark?"

"Yes, Jamey."

"Do I have to have an injection?"

"The injections keep you well, Jamey. If it weren't for the injections, you wouldn't be going home today. Now roll over on your stomach."

The child obeyed her quickly. His body was quite thin, although not as emaciated as it had been upon admission. The chart showed that his temperature had been flat for a week now. Marilyn had asked the resident about the length of remissions in childhood, and he had said,

"A week or so, a month, six weeks—you don't get the long spells of nearly complete recovery that you occasionally see in adults. Of course, with these newer therapies, such as the one Bray is trying on the Lewis boy, you can't tell—might be longer even in a child."

"Miss Clark?"

"Yes, Jamey. That didn't hurt, did it?"

"Only a little. Miss Clark, is something right or wrong with Mommy?"

The child's unusually lucid eyes searched her own. Marilyn was taken by surprise at his question. In her confusion, she dropped the hypodermic and had to stoop to retrieve it. The needle was hopelessly blunted; she must remember to discard it before she tried to use it again.

"You'll be seeing your mother this morning, Jamey. As soon as the doctor comes to examine you again, we'll be dressing you to go home," Marilyn said.

"But I heard Dr. Bray say mommy has a person allision."

Marilyn bent down and took his hand between both of her own. She wanted to hold him tight, to keep him safe. "There's nothing wrong with your mother, Jamey—I promise you."

"Miss Clark?"

"Yes, Jamey."

"It is so time for Christmas, isn't it?"

"Why do you ask that?"

Billy, who had continued to listen, hanging over the side of his crib, now interrupted excitedly. "I know it isn't time for Christmas yet—I know it. My parents always tell me when it's nearly Christmas!"

"Well, this time they forgot, Billy. If it wasn't time for Jamey's Christmas, we wouldn't be sending him home today, now, would we?" she answered.

Billy trumpeted loudly. "Ah, I don't think you know about Christmas and when it comes," he said. "I think you're guessing."

But he lay back in his crib and did not ask any more questions.

Chapter 3

"I KNOW it isn't time for Christmas," Elizabeth Lewis said. She was seven and in the second grade at school, and she was very sure of what she knew. Her mother looked at her daughter, sitting so erect at the kitchen-table, sipping her milk; and Dorothy Lewis thought, I should be glad, thankful, it's only one, not both of them.

"Miss McIntyre would have told us if Christmas was coming," Elizabeth continued. "It's not for months and months yet. Halloween is what's next; we are all supposed to bring a pumpkin to school. Daddy, may I have a pumpkin, a real one with a real candle in it?"

"*Each* of us is to bring a pumpkin, darling," her mother corrected her. Dorothy Lewis glanced at her husband, who had finished his second muffin and was patting his mouth with his napkin. "Won't you explain it to her, Bob?"

Robert Lewis pushed his plate aside. "We'll see about the pumpkin, honey," he said to his daughter. He looked at his watch and shook his head. "You'd better finish your breakfast, or you'll be late to school."

"But, Bob," his wife said, "we have to tell her sometime."

Robert stood, shoving back his chair abruptly so that it made the scraping noise that Dorothy disliked. He walked across the narrow kitchen and, clasping his hands behind him, gazed out of the window at the back-yard, the border garden with its straggly marigolds and zinnias blowing in the wind, the half-completed garage that he

was building on week-ends. "Your brother is coming home from the hospital today, Liz."

Elizabeth banged her empty milk glass down on the table. "Oh, Daddy, is he?" She scrambled off her chair and ran to his side, pulling at his hand, prancing.

Dorothy looked jealously at her daughter's long, strong legs, then bowed her head. It was not fair. And it was not right of her to feel this way.

Robert still had not turned around, but he had reached back to his daughter's head and was rumpling her hair, the bow already undone and on the floor. "Yes, we're bringing him home today—for good."

"Daddy, that means Jamey is all better?"

"Not all better, darling—but better," Dorothy said. "He is still a very sick little boy. We'll have to be quiet and think of him first of all before we do anything that might disturb or frighten him."

Bob turned half about and looked at his wife. "If you want me to tell her, why don't you let me?" he asked.

"Don't be tense, Bob—you'll only communicate it to her."

"I suppose you're not tense. I suppose it isn't natural for both of us to be tense," the father said.

"Daddy, what's the matter?" Elizabeth asked, glancing up at the tall man who had not shaved and who wore no tie. His features were heavy and his face flushed, his forceful, dark eyes and easy smile giving him bluff, hearty good looks.

"We have to tell her, Bob."

"But not all at once," her husband objected. "We can tell her a little at a time, when she thinks to ask questions." He rubbed the back of his hand fondly against Elizabeth's cheek. "Your brother is much better than he was when he went away, honey—but he isn't well."

"But, Daddy, I want to ask questions now," Elizabeth said. Bob looked down at his daughter and at his own hand that was loosely caught in her amber curls. Her eyes, dark like his own, gave back to him the confidence he did not feel: you will tell me the truth.

"Oh, Robert, what are you doing to her hair? If you only knew how much time it takes me every morning, when I've so many other things to do, you wouldn't be so careless!"

Dorothy was kneeling beside Elizabeth, mother hands upon her hair, working at it skilfully, beautifying the small head. Bob stuck his hand into his pocket and shifted his weight, wondering what it was he saw that made him want to look away. His wife crouched beside his daughter was a sight he sometimes glimpsed fondly in his mind's eye, when he was off on a trip, driving along a monotonous stretch of road. He especially liked the fact that when Dorothy and Elizabeth were together they almost seemed to be sisters. Near her daughter, Dorothy grew younger, the lines of her face softer and prettier; while Elizabeth's small features reflected her mother's years and gained a grave charm.

"There!" Dorothy said, straightening up and giving the ribbon she had once again tied one more pat. "There!—now if you'll only leave it alone——"

"Daddy——" Elizabeth asked. "Is Jamey going to die?"

Bob watched his wife stand, her eyes growing larger as if the expression that had drained from her face was welled in them. Time slowed, and it took a processional moment for his hand to make a fist inside his pocket.

"Of course not, darling," Dorothy said. She was not looking at her daughter. She is looking at me, Bob thought. She is telling me it is my fault. But how? Why?

"But he is still very, very sick?" the child asked.

One of us should look at her, Bob thought, or she'll

know the truth. Or is it worth it? Don't children always know when you lie? He did glance at Elizabeth and he saw that she was regarding him as before, her eyes like his own when he confronted himself in the glass.

"Your brother will be very sick for a long time, the doctor says." It was not a whole lie, but was it any better than what Dorothy had said?

"Daddy, answer me a question?" Elizabeth asked.

"What do you want to know?"

His wife sighed and went over to the table, began to pick up the cups and saucers, rattling them.

"Is it a long time until Christmas?"

"Perhaps not as long as you might think."

"But it's a very short time until Halloween, isn't it?"

"Not so long," Robert said.

"Halloween comes before Christmas—always," Elizabeth said.

"I guess so."

"Don't you know? Teacher knows. She said it comes next week." Elizabeth stood upon one foot. She began to hop.

Dorothy dropped a pile of plates and silverware into the sink. She dried her hands on a towel and threw the towel at the sideboard. "Now you two get your hats and coats on, or Liz is going to be late again at school," she cried, giving her seven-year-old a push toward the hall and the coat closet.

Elizabeth began to skip, but only after a hesitant moment during which she had seemed about to stand her ground. She skipped into the hall, and soon husband and wife heard the reassuring noise of falling hangers.

"We can't keep on evading her," Dorothy said. Her hand reached out for her husband's.

"You were the one who said Jamey would be all right," Robert reminded her.

"I know. I didn't say quite that, Bob—and you know I didn't. But what I said was bad enough. I—well, when she asked me directly, I couldn't bring myself to say yes. I know we'll have to tell her sometime——"

"Be quiet—she'll hear us," Robert said.

They stood silently, and then another hanger fell. "Mommy!"

"I'm coming, darling," Dorothy cried, running from the room. "Can't you find your coat?"

Bob went to the window and looked out at the framework of the garage. As soon as he had the roof on, or even part of it, he could park the car there nights. Even if he did not have time to complete the garage before Spring, it would give the car some protection.

He ran his hand over his face. He had meant to shave.

Dorothy Lewis watched her husband and daughter wave to her from the car as Robert pulled slowly away from the kerb. She let go of the curtain rod, let the nylon mesh erase them. Robert would be back in a few minutes, unless he stopped for cigarettes. It was like a Saturday, having Bob home like this—or like one of those rare days toward the end of a month, in which he had exceeded his sales quota and he just took off. She should be pleased to have him with her, and every so often she would begin to feel that way—only to remember why he was home.

She walked into the kitchen and stared at the dishes in the sink. Last night's dishes, this morning's dishes, orange rinds, coffee grounds, eggshells and cigarette ashes—no matter how many ash-trays I put out for that man, he still smears his soggy butts all over my plates.

Turning on both taps full, she let the water pour down upon the dishes and glasses that she had stacked helter-skelter in the gleaming metal basin. The force of the

water tumbled the plastic tray in which she had discarded the fruit skins and other waste; in no time peelings and scraps were floating on the swirling water. The sight disgusted her.

She twisted the cold-water tap until only scalding water flowed into the sink, rolled up her sleeves and fished around until she had collected all the oddments of garbage. Then she restacked the dishes neatly, glad for the righteous sting of the steaming fluid. Working quickly and meticulously, she had all the dishes and glasses scrubbed and dried in a few minutes, although the flesh of her hands and arms was flushed by the heat.

Her mind was clear. She felt sound again, a possible being in a possible world. Dorothy unrolled her sleeves and walked into the living-room; usually at this time she commenced her housework, but today she had arranged her routine so that it was not necessary. Bob had been irritable last night when he had seen her dusting and using the vacuum; he had not been able to realize that her work had to be done no matter what happened.

Dorothy sat in her husband's chair, a thing she never did. She took a cigarette out of a pottery box and lighted it with one of her husband's hoard of kitchen matches. She breathed in the smoke several times, but she could not taste it.

The morning already seemed over long. She could read the newspaper and there was that book she had borrowed from the library the previous week. Anything she attempted would only be another form of waiting; there was nothing else she could do. That was what she could not accept—the waiting, the having nothing to do but to wait.

There had been times in her life when she had thought she had worked out all that mattered. She had had problems, but then who expected to live without difficulties? But Dorothy had known what she wanted and

what it was possible for her to obtain; she had looked at all sides of her life, of her husband's life, as realistically as possible. She had decided to be satisfied with her lot.

Sometimes she had thought of her life as though she were a child in a large, sunny room completely filled with huge assortments of building blocks. There was every shape, every colour, every type of block conceivable in that room, far more than any one child could hope ever to find time to use. Sooner or later, the child—herself—would have to choose the blocks she liked most among those that she could reach. The child must shut her eyes and thoughts to all the other blocks and the wonderful edifices that might be constructed with them; she must concentrate on her own little group of forms, putting them together carefully, thinking out all the consequences before a blue pyramid was placed beside a red sphere. But if the child was deliberate, and if she succeeded in shutting out of her mind all the other blocks, all the other ways, she would be happy—nothing could go wrong.

And then someone had come into the room—or had it been *something*?—at the moment when she was about to succeed, the very instant her tallest, most complicated structure had been taking shape—when she had felt that if she put this here and that there (and perhaps, but she would have to wait and see, one more over there), she would be able to stand back and to view it all as some day it might be, to grasp the whole of it for the first time—someone had entered just then, had caused some disturbance, the draught of the door opening, the vibration of the floor due to an unusually heavy tread—and the entire beautiful contraption had toppled, fallen to pieces—was falling to pieces slowly with the exasperating vagueness of a nightmare—and there was nothing she could do to stop it, nothing to do but to wait.

Dorothy walked over to the mirror above the fireplace and watched her hands improve her make-up and tidy her hair. She felt as young as ever. She might never have married, never have had children. She wanted there to be more to her life than this, only this—this living day to day with Bob, this trying to accept the fact that Jamey—I can't make myself think of it, she thought, knowing that she was thinking of it, that she could not keep from it. She felt an ache in her throat, had a vague sensation of soft folds of cloth covering her face, of warm tears drying in the sweet, rustling coolness of her mother's apron. If I could only run to her again and bury my face in her lap. If there were only some way out. . . .

She tried to be aware of her face in the mirror, but all she could see were her eyes, their indeterminate blueness that to her never seemed to be distinguishable, quite, from the hazy indefinite blur of the mirror. Concentrating as hard as she could, she made herself look at her lips, at the smudge of lipstick where she must have pressed her hand against her mouth—but the effort made her dizzy and she had to glance away.

She threw the extinguished cigarette, that had dangled from her hand as she had walked the room, into the fireplace, gazed at it lying there upon the tiles irritatingly out of place. Am I out of place, too? she asked herself. Is that what is wrong? Did I ever belong here?

Oh, damn, what did it matter? This was her life, and it was a good one. And how could she be thinking of herself today?

She went upstairs and sat at her vanity and made a new mouth for herself, brushing the lipstick on softly. She put fresh polish on her nails, too, although they really did not need it. But it was always wise to look your best when you went out. You could not know when you might meet

someone new, someone on whom you would want to make your best impression.

You could not tell when your life would be in for a change.

"Do you think it is really wise?" Miss McIntyre asked.

Robert Lewis clenched the steering-wheel. Why couldn't people let you alone at a bad time like this? He had not meant to talk with Elizabeth's teacher this morning, although Dorothy and he had agreed yesterday that they could not put off discussing their plans with her much longer. For one thing, he had not shaved, he was not even wearing a tie. He had only intended to drop Liz off in front of the school, drive around the corner to the news-shop for some cigarettes and come straight home.

Miss McIntyre was standing on the sidewalk talking with another teacher as he pulled up. Even so, he might have avoided her if Elizabeth had not noticed her and waved. The teacher, a rather attractive young woman, smiled at his daughter and then, seeing him behind the wheel, came over to him. She said to Elizabeth, "You run along inside while I talk with your father."

Bob resented her easy assertion of authority, but he was not quick enough with an excuse to escape the questions he dreaded. The thought also occurred to him that, if he told Miss McIntyre about their situation now, he might save Dorothy some pain—she would probably consider it her responsibility to inform the teacher, and if there was anything he could do to lighten his wife's load, he meant to do it.

"How is your little boy, Mr. Lewis?" the teacher inquired. "I've been wanting to ask, but I haven't because I wasn't sure how much you had confided in Elizabeth."

"Actually, we haven't talked about it in front of her, Miss McIntyre," Bob replied. "She knows that he is com-

ing home from the hospital today—and that he is still seriously ill, that he will be sick for a long time. He has had a remission, you know.”

The young woman smiled tentatively. “I suppose that’s good news? It means that he has a better chance? I’m afraid I’m not up on the latest medical terms—with all these new drugs and operations you have to have real knowledge of the field to keep abreast.”

Bob felt a need to end the conversation, or at least to be deceitful and say that there was some hope for his son. He wished people would not ask him about Jamey: they did not want to know the truth, and when he had to report it to them, they seemed driven to try to persuade him that it could not be as bad as he said.

“As I understand it—from what Dr. Bray says, that is—he will have a few weeks, a month at most, of relatively normal life. They used a new therapy that is still in the experimental stage. We are lucky that he responded to it.” Bob paused, glanced away from the sympathetic face of the young teacher who wanted to be kind, knowing he should tell her more but disliking it.

“He’ll be home for Christmas. Not actually for Christmas, of course—you see, we probably won’t have that long. But—well, he isn’t five yet, he doesn’t know about dates—we can have a tree and some sort of a celebration.”

Bob watched the gloved hand smooth the sill of the car window. He looked at her eyes, saw the warmth in them and something else, some conflict, as when a customer sought some way to say no, not this time.

“Do you think it is really wise?” Miss McIntyre asked. “I’m probably not the one to advise you, since I see it only from Elizabeth’s point of view, Mr. Lewis. And whatever you do it’s going to be hard on Elizabeth; I know you realize that as well as I.”

The gloved hand came to rest upon the sill; one finger

had found a bit of dirt, had arched and was picked at the incrustation, removing it. Bob felt a surge of anger that made his head grow light. She is only trying to do her job as she sees it, he told himself, this is no time to lose my temper.

"We are thinking of Elizabeth, Miss McIntyre," he said smoothly. "But we have to think of James, too. Liz has a long life before her. It won't be pleasant for any of us, but we'll get over it—and so will Liz."

"She is at a very impressionable age," the teacher said. Her finger had at last worked loose the scrap of dirt and was now smoothing the spot where it had been. "I don't know, and you can say it isn't any of my business. I know it isn't easy for you; it is so very unfortunate that such a thing should have to—have to happen. And I'm sure I wouldn't know what to do if I were you. But—but does it do any good to dramatize it so?"

Bob had hardly been able to hold back his anger. "I don't think we mean to do that," he said, his voice the more even as his anger rose. "We only want to give our little boy one more Christmas—a last good time."

"But he is so young. Can he really understand about Christmas yet, grasp it the way an older child like Elizabeth does? Aren't you only ruining Christmas for your daughter? Isn't it possible that she will never be able to have a happy Christmas again?"

Bob's foot pressed down upon the accelerator, racing the engine. "Aren't you the one who is dramatizing, Miss McIntyre? You forget that Liz is going to live, that she is going to have many other Christmases, and plenty of time to forget."

"It's your decision——"

"I'm sorry, but I have to go now. We have to be at the hospital early this morning. I'm glad to have had your opinion."

Miss McIntyre's hand dropped away from the car window. She stepped back, smiled hesitantly, and Bob saw again that she was young. "I hope I haven't hurt you," she said. "It wasn't my intention. It's only that your daughter is one of my favourite pupils——"

Bob's face froze into his most business-like smile. He let out the clutch gradually so that the car moved before he spoke. "I'm glad we had a chance to talk. Some other time——"

He watched her in the rear-view mirror until he swung the car around the corner. The teacher was still standing at the kerb, looking after him, as if she could make him return if only she stayed there long enough.

He could not quite forget her or what she had said. Miss McIntyre could not possibly have known that he shared most of her misgivings, that more than once he had wanted to say to Dorothy, "Can't we forget Christmas? Is it even a good idea to bring Jamey home, to have all the neighbours coming in with presents, to have to tell everybody a hundred times over the same things, to have to try to make Elizabeth understand what is happening?"

Bob rolled up the window and put the ignition key in his pocket. He did not open the door, but continued to sit in the car staring at the dashboard. Why didn't he want his son to come home? He could think of plenty of reasons he might use to impress other people, but he could not lie to himself. He wanted Jamey to stay in the hospital.

As soon as he admitted to himself that this was what he feared, Bob knew it could not be so. He could feel his boy in his arms at that moment, feel his hard young body against his shoulder, so different from the yielding lithe-ness of Liz, so manly. He could hear Jamey's voice that

was rarely shrill, that already had strength and character. Then Bob saw his son running along the beach, only last summer, his legs pumping sturdily, the sand spurting between his toes, tumbling as he tripped and fell, lying gasping for the breath that had been knocked out of him, and when he had found it, laughing in gasps, not crying, by God, laughing. And Bob knew that he did want him home; it was only that it was going to be so damned difficult to arrange, the money and all.

His hand patted the hip pocket of his trousers, where he carried his wallet and the coupon books from the bank and the loan company. He would have to find some more cash somewhere; there were no two ways about it. Yesterday, while Dorothy had been with Jamey, Bob had talked with Dr. Bray and that social worker at the hospital. He had listened to them patiently as they had explained that Jamey should have two nurses, one for nights and one for days—but that he could not leave the hospital unless there was at least a night nurse. "You and your wife have to sleep sometime," the doctor had said.

Bob had thought of the cheque he had drawn at the bank only that morning, the bill he owed at the hospital—the bill Dr. Bray had not even presented yet—without taking into consideration the expenses of Christmas, he just did not see how he could swing it. Then the social worker had said something about a national association that might be willing to defray some of the costs. "And we could make a public appeal—you have no notion of how generous people can be when their heart-strings are touched."

He ran his hand over his unshaven face. Did Dot and he look that bad off? Bob was certain he had said nothing about his financial doubts, but it had seemed as if the head of social service had read his thoughts.

"The national association sometimes encourages the right kind of publicity," Dr. Bray had said. "A case like

Jamey's that becomes news helps them in their own fund-raising."

Bob had realized that both the doctor and the social worker had meant to be kind. They had been trying to make it easy for him to accept charity.

"The association has an investment in your son, Mr. Lewis," the grey-haired woman had said, rubbing the eraser of her pencil against the glass-topped surface of her desk. "Much of the equipment in the hospital, the large X-ray machines and practically all of the diagnostic lab, has been given to us by the association. Without it, your son would not be doing so well. It's only right for you to help the association now, don't you think?"

Bob had held down his temper then, too; his business, seeing ten or twenty officious men a day, having always to be pleasant with them no matter what they said because you never knew when a single lapse in manners might kill a sale or a contract, had made him good at not showing his true emotions. "I hadn't thought about it at all," he had said. "I'll have to talk with my wife, turn it over in my mind."

"Of course. But you will arrange for a night nurse, Mr. Lewis? I'm afraid that is essential. Someone the doctor knows—or, if you wish, the hospital can make a recommendation."

Dr. Bray had taken his arm in the hall. "I know that came as a shock, Lewis." Bob had looked at him, a man only a few years older than himself, who had been a name to him, just a name, until his son's long illness. How had Dorothy chosen him for a doctor—and what had she told him? Then Bob had seen that the doctor had stopped smiling and had withdrawn his hands. He had realized that his own body was rigid, his hands fists.

"I've always paid my own way, doctor. We have hospitalization, a bank account—there's my insurance." He

had never meant to touch his insurance; that was for Dorothy and Elizabeth.

"I'm sure of that," the doctor had said. "But I want you to understand about this—times aren't what they used to be. Before we had all these different treatments, before we knew as much as we do now about these diseases, our patients died. Your son would be dead now—you know that, don't you?"

Bob had wet his lips, but had not trusted himself to speak. He had nodded his head.

"Money has to be a secondary consideration," the doctor had gone on. "If I know of a therapy that may lengthen a patient's life, I have to use it—and we have to worry about paying for it later. Sometimes it isn't easy, but what else is there to do? Now, in Jamey's case, with him going home to an early Christmas, the national association thinks there is a possibility of a great deal of favourable publicity. You remember last year there was a boy who had nephritis and his doctor made a public appeal for water-melons in the dead of winter——"

"I know what you are driving at," Bob had said. "We just hadn't thought about it, that's all. I'll have to talk to Dorothy about it. You don't agree to anything like this all at once; you have to think of all the angles."

The doctor had shaken Bob's hand and had gone off. Bob had walked back to the lounge to wait for his wife, shredding a cigarette in his hands. Why can't Jamey stay in the hospital, he had thought—why do we have to bring him home for Christmas? But even as he had thought of not going through with their plans, Bob had known he could not allow himself this easy way out. A man had to live with himself.

Dorothy had come into the lounge a few minutes later, had looked about her, not seeing him until he called her

name softly, although she had been gazing right at him. Bob had known at once that he could not talk with her about what was worrying him as yet; he could tell from the vague blue stare of her eyes, from the way her mouth trembled at the corners and her hand smoothed at her skirt above the hip, that she had her own preoccupation and that he would have to be patient and await the time when she would be ready to share his trouble.

His wife had appeared older to him, standing there near the entrance to the lounge, older and more worn than he had ever realized. Could it have been the grey light of the cloudy day, seeping through the blinds, striking her head askance, toning down the gold of her hair, dimming her glance and giving her complexion a steely cast? He had felt her start as he took her hand, cold as the ring on her finger. "You took a long time," he had said quickly, using his voice to reassure her.

"Jamey kept asking me questions," Dorothy had said, slipping her hand out of his own, drawing on her gloves. "He knows he is going home, and he knows more than that, too. Oh, Bob, what are we going to do?"

He had wanted to keep her from crying then at any cost. "We are going out to lunch, that's what we're going to do," he said.

She had managed to smile up at him. "Do you think we should? Is there enough time before Elizabeth comes home from school?"

"We'll find a place near-by and ask them to serve us quickly," he had said. "You need a rest."

They had gone to a chain restaurant that had a reputation for the gentility of its waitresses and the modesty of its portions. Dorothy had only tasted her food, though she had drunk several cups of black coffee. "I've no appetite," she had said, "but then I don't often eat much at lunch."

"I do wish I could persuade you to let up. You aren't going to help Jamey by making yourself sick."

"I know. *He* knows something is wrong, Bob; I can see it in his eyes, the way he looks at me. *He* isn't questioning me; if he was, I could stand it. But *he* trusts me so; if only there was something I could do."

"We are going to do the only thing we can," Bob had said, knowing how she felt about Jamey because the same expression was in her eyes, and it was his turn to want to look away. And yet for Dorothy to feel that he could help, that somehow made it better for him, made it at last possible for him to talk.

"We are going to make him as happy as we can for as long as we can; isn't that enough?" he had gone on. He had not waited for her answer, as if he feared she might disagree. "If he was older, if he understood about death, then it might be much more terrible. But as it is, if we make him happy as long as we can—well, he may never realize—he may never know what——"

"I wish I could believe that," his wife had said. "You can only say it because you haven't been seeing him as often as I have. Bob, he does know, he does understand; oh, not completely, he couldn't—but he does grasp some of it, enough of it, possibly, to make it that much more awful. And he doesn't talk about it; I can feel that he knows so much more than he tells me each time I hold him. He doesn't want to let me go, dear. It's as if he was a little baby again, waking up in the middle of the night with bad colic. You remember how it was then, even before he could sit up, how his hands would hold on so tight, never want to let go? He's like that now, and it does something to me to know I can't even help him as much as I could then; I can't even tell him the truth."

Bob had looked around for the waitress, thinking that perhaps still another cup of coffee would make Dorothy

calm. He could never catch a waitress's attention when he wanted to, and at last he gave up. Dorothy had refused the cigarette he offered her, and he had put the pack back in his pocket without taking one himself.

"Do you think we should go through with this business about Christmas?" he had asked. He had not liked himself for bringing the matter up then, but he had felt that he had to keep talking and it was what was on his mind.

"We have to, Bob," his wife had said. "Miss Clark took me aside and warned me that Jamey had heard us talking with the doctor. He knows about it already. When I was reading him a story he asked me who Santa Claus was."

"What did he mean *who*?"

"He said, 'Moms, who is Santa Claus—Daddy or you?' "

Bob had smiled, had wanted to laugh but could not. "Did he say that—really they know everything these days, don't they? You can't conceal anything from them, even at his age." He felt proud of Jamey.

"Isn't that just what I've been trying to tell you?" Dorothy had replied. "That he knows—oh, he may not know about death the way you and I know about it—although when you get right down to it, Bob, how much does anybody know? I lie awake these nights trying to imagine it for myself, and I can't—I can't! Sometimes I am simply terrified, but still nothing comes to me. If I'm that way, a person as old as I am, who has had as much as I have—if I'm like that about my own personal end, if I can't even let myself think of it, but trying to makes me so afraid, how must Jamey feel? What is it like for him at night, all alone in that ward, trying to sleep and not able to, shut off from everything he knows?"

"You are convinced it is worse than it is," Bob had said. "You are confusing what you know with what Jamey

knows. You are forgetting that the doctor has ordered medicine to make him sleep at night, and that he isn't alone in the ward, there are other children. The older boy in the crib next to his own—didn't he call him Billy?—he seems to be his special friend."

Dorothy had smiled. "That is so. They make believe they are elephants. Did you know that, Bob? That isn't a room they are in; it's a water-hole deep in a jungle. All the children are elephants, and Billy is the biggest elephant; he watches over all the rest."

"You see, a child doesn't live in the same world as we do." He had reached across the small table and taken his wife's hand, smoothed its coldness. "Jamey may understand more about what is happening than I give him credit for, but if he does it isn't in our terms. If he lies awake at nights, and I doubt it, he isn't trying to imagine what death is like the way you do. He may be alone in a jungle, listening to the noises, afraid of lions, or bears, or tigers."

"What does he know about jungles?" Dorothy had asked, her hand moving swiftly, escaping his own. "I don't think he even has a book about the jungle."

"I took him to the circus last summer, remember? He was impressed by the elephants especially. I told him about the jungle then." Bob had thought for a moment, wanting to keep her talking, to try to lead her away from her trouble. "For that matter, a child Jamey's age doesn't have to know about a thing the way an adult does to imagine it. Last year, when he wasn't four yet, he was afraid of wolves. He hadn't seen a wolf in all his life, and still he'd wake up every night frightened of them."

Dorothy's hand had restlessly poked at her hair. She had opened her purse, snatched out the mirror, glared at it. "Don't you realize what you've just said?"

"I was trying to show you that Jamey, if he does under-

stand anything about his own illness, doesn't think of it the way you and I do," Bob had said.

"You said that Jamey didn't have to know about something the way you and I do to understand it," his wife had told him. As she spoke, her purse had slipped from her hands, had fallen to the floor. Lipstick and vanity, change purse and keys, several envelopes, a pencil and a pen, all Dorothy's belongings were scattered under the table and in the aisle.

By the time Bob had helped her pick them up, the waitress had come with the check. He had decided he could not talk with his wife about the bills, about the social worker's suggestion. That would only upset her more, and it was not worth it.

Bob slammed the car door and walked around to the trunk of the automobile. He ran his hand over his face again, wondering if he had to shave, and coming once more to the conclusion that he did. He selected the key to the trunk and opened the lock, swung the lid up and looked into the recess at the pile of neat cardboard boxes. There were seven of them altogether, each containing a part of the outfit. The biggest one held the track, the smallest a pair of remote-control switches that had tiny red and green lights which winked off and on as the switch was thrown. The locomotive was a steam type, a 2-6-2 with heavy cast-iron driving-wheels. There was a tender, a freight car, a gondola, a tank car, a coal car that unloaded itself and a caboose. He had been careful to buy plenty of track with a crossover and a real trestle-type bridge that had an incline on either side. The clerk had assured him that the powerful locomotive had a worm drive and that it could climb a ten per cent grade—think of it! He had almost neglected to order a transformer, but when the clerk had reminded him, he had taken a large

one, so that if Jamey wanted more equipment there would be plenty of current to operate it all at the same time. And he had bought the largest tunnel he could find, going to several stores before he was satisfied—a long, high tunnel into which the locomotive and all the cars disappeared for a second or two, and you saw the headlight coming around the curve before the train itself emerged, chugging and blowing its whistle whenever you pressed the button.

Bob sighed and let the lid down gently, turned the key in the lock. No sense in bringing all those cartons into the house yet; Dorothy was always complaining she did not have enough closet space as it was. He knew his wife would say Jamey was too young for an electric train, but women just did not understand about these things. A real boy was never too young for a train, never. . . .

Chapter 4

It was so dark. Jamey had awakened to find himself all alone in the dark. He had turned over to look for the biggest elephant, but all he could see was the dark, folds of it, deeper and deeper, moving back and forth but revealing nothing, still and lonely. If I keep watching, the search-lights will come, they will come in the window and shine on me. And then Jamey knew that even the lights were gone, because the river was gone, the jungle was gone: he was all alone.

Jamey turned restlessly on to his other side and gazed at the small blue light that Nurse Clark had left burning on the floor near his crib. "If you awake in the night, Jamey, and I'm not here, just call me and I'll come. But I'll leave this light on so that you won't be frightened." As he remembered her words, he knew where he was: he was home for Christmas; it was all right.

And yet it was not all right. Even with the light, Jamey was afraid. He had been afraid before he had come awake; he had seen something before his eyes opened, something had moved near him, something big and terrible, something that stooped and had great black wings that swooped over him, that smelled dusty like the cupboard he had been shut into last summer, that would smother him if he did not wake up and cry out. But now his eyes were open, he was not sleeping, and he could not remember what it was that had frightened him. He had known it in his sleep; it had been too close to him—he had felt its breath. But now he did not know.

"Miss Clark?"

Jamey heard a sound, a noise of papers rattling and then a scuffling. He swallowed hard and listened to a hammer beat in his head. Then he heard Nurse Clark's footsteps outside his room, heard the door creak open. He raised himself and saw her white against the darkness. She was in the room with him, and he felt safer.

"What is it, Jamey?"

"Nothing."

"There must have been something."

"It was too close to me."

"What was too close? Do you want the window open a little wider?" The nurse walked across in front of his crib, and Jamey watched the flow of her skirts, wishing he could reach out and touch the cloth, hold it in his hand. The window creaked as she raised it and the cool air rushed through the room.

"Do you think you can sleep now?"

Nurse Clark was bending over him, the faint scent of her body warm and pleasant. Jamey took her hand and held it. "There were wings—black wings—and it smelled dusty," he said.

"You were having a dream." The nurse's voice had a chuckle in it. Jamey liked to hear the chuckle; it made him feel as though everything in the whole world was funny and safe if you were only as big and as wise as Nurse Clark. "Do you want me to sing to you?"

"It wasn't a dream," Jamey said.

She tucked him in. "You try to go to sleep. You've had your pill, and it ought to be all you can do to stay awake. If you need me, I'll be in the next room. I'll come whenever you call me, but I want you to try to go to sleep. Will you promise me?"

"Yes, Nurse Clark. I'll try."

Jamey watched her leave the room, shutting the door all but a crack. He watched the folds of darkness, each

blacker than the next, shift back and forth. Sometimes he could almost see it, see its big wings, hear its wings as it flew. He knew that it always kept behind the darkness, that the darkness was between him and it, and that was why he could not see it clearly. If he looked as hard as he could, sometimes he could see the least little bit of a wing-tip as the shadows moved about him, but as soon as he saw even this much, it was gone. Yet he knew that as soon as he slept, it would be there.

What was it? Jamey only wished he knew. Sometimes when he shut his eyes, when he felt himself going down and around, he would think that he almost knew the name of the great swooping thing that lay behind the night. He knew that when it was near him there was danger and he was afraid, scared for his mommy. He could hear its wings then and he would want to see his mommy, want to touch her and hold her so that the black, dusty shape could not harm her.

Something was wrong with his mommy. Nobody talked about it, nobody told him and, although he kept wanting to ask, he could not. He had heard the doctor say she had a person alcision. What was a person alcision? Would she have to go to the hospital and never be near him again?

Jamey made himself shut his eyes. He was going to try to go to sleep, or almost asleep—he would stay just a little bit awake and pretend he was asleep so that he could see the black wings when they shone behind the dark, so he would know its name. If he knew its name, he could tell his mommy and Nurse Clark, tell his dad so that he wouldn't let them come for his mommy and take her away as they had the poor elephant.

He felt himself going down, around and down, and he sucked in his breath, holding it deep inside him because he had learned this was the best way to stay just a little

bit awake. His body felt long and light and he was aware of all the tiny aches and the tiredness that were there all the time, even after an injection, but which he usually forgot. He was nearly asleep; it was almost time to open his eyes again, to look out hard for the terrible, dark thing. It would be better not to peep yet, though; he was always opening his eyes too soon—that was the mistake.

Jamey heard the door shut. He had not remembered the door; he never remembered about it until it was too late. He was shut in the cupboard with the black thing; it happened every time, and each time it happened he knew he had to try his best to remember about it the next time, and each time he forgot. He was in the cupboard and it was black, folds of dusty blackness, wings brushing by him; he could feel the air swirl. He was alone in the dark, shut away from his mommy; they were never going to come and let him out. He had to lie as still as he could, to breathe as quietly as he could, so they would not know he was there. He felt cold; but his cheeks burned, and the breath caught fast inside him twisted and turned, became a ball of pain. If he could only cry out, so mommy would hear before it was too late—so she could come and let him out and he could tell her to run with him before they took her away—But it was impossible to cry out. He was shut up for ever, and he would stay there for ever; they would never let him out.

“I know a secret.”

Jamey came awake with a start, his whole body leaping in a long, shivering fright. Someone, someone small and white, stood beside his crib—fingers thrust between the bars, wiggling like snakes.

“Fraidy-cat,” his sister said scornfully. “You are ’fraid of me.”

“I’m not,” Jamey said, sitting up, knowing now that it was only Lizbeth in her pyjamas who stood whitely beside

him. He knew he was forgetting something, and he felt better because he was; but he also knew that he should remember. "I'm not 'fraid."

"Yes, you are. I saw you. I saw you jump like a fraidy-cat, you silly."

"I'm not a silly."

"Yes, you are," Elizabeth said. She wiggled her fingers at him, reaching in between the bars as far as she could, nearly scraping his nose. "Don't you want to know what I know? Don't you want to know my secret?"

"Tell me."

"No. I'm not going to tell a fraidy-cat. Anyway, you wouldn't understand; you aren't big enough to understand."

"Yes I am."

"No, I'm not going to tell you."

Jamey wanted to cry, but he would not let himself. Lizbeth made fun of him when he cried. He was afraid she would go away, though. He did not want to be alone; he wanted to talk to her, to ask her questions. If he only knew something that she did not know; if he had a secret to tell her——

Then suddenly he knew that he did have a secret, big secret. "I know a secret, too," he said loudly.

"You don't," his sister said.

"Yes, I do."

"You're still a baby. They don't tell you anything. How could you know a secret? You don't know a secret," Elizabeth said. "How could you know a real secret?"

"I heard Dr. Bray talking."

"About you?" His sister was excited. Jamey felt happy that he knew something Lizbeth wanted to know.

"About mommy. Something's wrong with mommy."

"There isn't."

"There is. I heard Dr. Bray say so."

"I don't believe you."

Jamey thought about it. What was the use of having a secret, if nobody believed you?

"You couldn't have a real secret," Elizabeth said, her voice even less certain.

"Yes, I have. I heard Dr. Bray talking to mommy. He said there was something wrong with her. He said she had a 'person alcision.' He said there was something 'right-orwrong' and she had a person alcision.' "

"What's a 'person alcision'?" Elizabeth asked. She had put her thumb into her mouth.

"It's something 'rightorwrong'," Jamey said loudly.

"You're silly. That's not a real secret. You don't even know anything. It's either right or it's wrong. It can't be 'rightorwrong'. You're too much of a baby to know even that!"

"It is so a real secret. They're going to take mommy away. I know they are." He was remembering, not all of it, but enough to be scared and alone, to want to be held.

"Did Dr. Bray say that?"

Jamey could not lie. He shook his head and began to bounce up and down on the mattress, although bouncing made his head ache.

"I knew he didn't," Elizabeth said triumphantly. "I knew you were making it all up. A little baby like you couldn't have a real secret."

"It is a real secret," Jamey said.

"Not as real as mine."

"Tell me. I told you."

"Well . . . do you promise not to tell?"

"I promise."

"Hope to die if you tell?"

"Hope to die if I tell."

"Well," Elizabeth looked around her wisely, running her tongue over her lips, "well, it was something mother

and daddy were talking about the day you came home. They were having an argument before I went to school. They were having breakfast, and I didn't drink all my milk and only half my orange juice, and they didn't notice it."

"That's no secret," Jamey said. "That isn't half as real a secret as mine."

"I haven't finished, that's all," Elizabeth said, sounding like mommy when you interrupted her. "They were having an argument, and I don't know if I'm going to tell you about what. If I tell and you tell, then everybody will know."

"I promise I won't tell."

"They were talking about whether they should give you a 'last Christmas'," Elizabeth said. "Mommy said they had to because they had already told you that they would, but daddy wasn't sure. And I know it's not Christmas for a long, long time yet, because next week it's Halloween, because teacher said so, and she knows."

"I'm going to have the best Christmas never," Jamey said. "That isn't a real secret."

"It is so a secret," Elizabeth said. "But not the real secret. The real secret is that mommy and daddy are only going to say it is Christmas—it won't be really Christmas. That's the real secret."

"I don't believe it."

"It is so—it is. I heard them talking. And I know teacher said that next was Halloween, and then Armistice day, and then Thanksgiving Day—and only then Christmas."

"I'm going to tell mommy," Jamey said. "I'm going to ask mommy if I'm not going to have the best Christmas never."

Chapter 5

As they left the movie, Bob asked his wife, "Wouldn't you like to go some place and have a drink or something to eat?"

Dorothy placed her hand upon her husband's arm, as if to hold him off. "Bob, do you think we really should? I just 'don't feel right about being out of the house and having a good time while Jamey is all alone."

Bob shrugged and strode off into the parking-lot ahead of her. He was still fussing with the lock to the car door, when she came up to him. "I don't know why I always try to open it with the trunk key first," he said. Dorothy could tell he was annoyed.

He held the door for her, slamming it after she had climbed in. He came around the other side, hunched behind the wheel, fitted the key into the ignition. "Where to?" he asked, staring straight ahead.

"I don't think we should; I really don't," Dorothy said. "I wouldn't enjoy myself." She rubbed her gloved fingers against her mouth. Bob had been cold and distant all evening; she felt that he had resented being with her, but she had told herself that he was only worried. They ought to have a talk.

"Dot?"

"Yes."

"It's terrible. It's the worst thing that ever happened. But we can't let it come between us. We have to go on, live our lives."

"But he's all alone," Dorothy said.

"Jamey isn't alone. Nurse Clark is with him. Anyway,

he is asleep. He wouldn't even know it if we were home with him."

Dorothy sighed. "Sometimes he only pretends to be asleep. I come in to cover him and he is so quiet I think he is sleeping soundly. Then I see an eyelid quiver, and I know. He is such a good little boy; it isn't fair."

"We'll go on home then, if that's the way you feel," he said.

"Isn't it how you feel?" his wife asked.

"Does it matter how I feel?"

"Bob, I don't want a quarrel; I don't think I could stand it." She leaned forward and turned on the radio, but as soon as the hum began she as quickly snapped it off. "Give me a cigarette and let's talk. Take me wherever you want to; I know it's hard for you and that somehow we grate on each other. I don't want it to be like that; really I don't. I suppose it's even my fault."

"Not if you want to go home," Bob said. "I won't force you to do anything you don't want." But he was already looking over his shoulder, backing the car.

Dorothy reached out and touched his hand, ran the tips of her fingers lightly across the hairs on his wrist. "I want to do what you want to do, Bob; you know I do. It's only that I feel so helpless."

They bumped across the lot and down the street. Dorothy gave a gasp when Bob took the turn that led them in the opposite direction from the business district and back toward their own neighbourhood, but she did not protest. They drove silently, slowing as the car found the familiar street. Bob did not swerve into the driveway: he parked in front of the house. Dorothy made no move to get out.

"I'm no help, am I, tell me?" she asked.

He lighted two cigarettes, giving her the one she had asked for a good while before. "It's that you won't let me

help you," he said. "God knows what is happening is hard on you, but you don't seem to want me to have any part of it. You hold it in to yourself, bar me from it. I don't think it's good for you, or Jamey."

"Why are you so annoyed with me?" she asked. She had let her cigarette go out. "You are angry, aren't you? You are bringing up that same old complaint, that Jamey is more my son than yours. Well, is that my fault?"

"Dot . . . don't make me sorry for things I said a long time ago."

"It isn't what you said a long time ago; it's what you've just got through saying that I'm talking about." She shifted her position until she was sitting in the far corner of the front seat, her head thrown back against the car window. A street-lamp's glare struck half her face, silvering her flesh, making her eyes glitter. He loved her then, loved her again.

"I went at it wrong, I'll admit," Bob said. "But it was only because I was worried about you. If you could see yourself the way you are these days, you would understand how I feel."

She sat tensely, seeming about to speak more than once. She leaned forward, found the lighter on the dash board, thrust her cigarette deep into its hot coil. Her mouth, for that instant, was on fire.

"I talked to Miss McIntyre the other day," Bob said. He knew his wife well enough to understand that it was up to him to break the silence.

"Why did you do that?"

"I didn't have much choice. It was the first day I took Liz to school. Miss McIntyre was standing there on the kerb when I pulled up. She started to talk to me."

"You didn't tell her anything about Jamey?" Dorothy asked. She leaned forward anxiously.

"I had to, Dorothy; she asked me. We can't go on not talking to people. They have a right to know."

She sank back, her eyes away from him. She traced her finger along the sill of the car window, exactly as Miss McIntyre had. It seemed that the coincidence was more than he could stand. "There is something the matter with you, Dorothy," he said, his voice louder than he wanted. "I haven't said anything. . . ."

"What are you complaining about now? Sometimes I think it's impossible for me to please you." Her hand dropped to the handle of the door, as if she wanted out.

"I'm not complaining; it's only that I'm concerned about you. I suppose it's only natural that you should be nervous, that you should want to avoid people. I know that when I saw Miss McIntyre standing there the other day, the last thing I wanted to do was to talk to her, to have her sympathize with me. But isn't it more than that with you? Isn't it that you want to keep your grief to yourself, not even share it with me—or your mother?"

"I can't bear to listen to Mother," Dorothy cried. "She goes on and on about how I have to be brave, how I have to keep up appearances for Elizabeth's sake." Dorothy made a strangled sound in her throat. "It's easy enough for Mother to say those things; we were all so healthy, nothing ever went wrong with her family. She keeps saying I'm young, that it isn't as if Jamey was my only child—she hasn't said it yet, but any day she is going to suggest that I have another."

"And is that so terrible?" Bob said. He flicked his cigarette out of the window, pleased at its angry arc into the night. "We can, you know; there's nothing to stop us."

"I don't want another child," Dorothy said. "Let's not talk about it."

Bob wanted to take her in his arms. He knew she did

not want to be held. But he could not leave her alone: he must in some way let her know that he understood, that he was on her side.

"Dot, you know I love you," he began.

Her hands were clenching each elbow, and the silhouette of her jaw trembled against the dashboard glow. Her face seemed paper-fragile, light as dust. "Sometimes love is not enough—sometimes I want most to be understood."

"I'm trying hard to understand. But you won't let me."

She stiffened. "What did you tell Miss McIntyre?"

"As little as I could."

"How much was that?"

He thought for a moment; it was important to be accurate. "Mostly I answered her questions, I believe. She asked me if Jamey was better, or words to that effect. I told her he had had a remission——"

"Why did you?"

He looked at Dorothy, as though he might discover some clue in her face. Her expression was as before, or he had got so that he was insensitive to the subtleties of her moods—he did not know which. "What would you have said?"

"I'd have said he was better. I would have ended the conversation as soon as I could. She was only being polite; she doesn't care." There was a quaver in her voice. "What has Elizabeth to do with it?" his wife asked suspiciously.

"Miss McIntyre was worried about how Liz would be affected by Jamey having an early Christmas. It was her opinion that what—what we are doing may not be such a good idea."

"Oh—oh, why can't people let us alone," Dorothy said.

"I don't know, Dot. Maybe it's because they feel for us, maybe they think we need friendship at a time like this.

If it was happening to someone you knew, isn't that how you would think?"

"But it isn't happening to someone we know, Bob—it isn't *even* happening to us, really—it's happening to Jamey. I'd give anything if it was happening to me, if I could take his—his place——"

"It doesn't do any good to talk that way," Bob said. "If you keep acting like this, if you don't look out, sooner or later Jamey will know. You don't want that to happen, do you?"

"You still believe he doesn't know?"

"I don't see how he could," Bob said. He did not want to go over all that ground again.

Dorothy was silent. Bob was uneasy, and to be doing something, he turned on the radio, idly pushing the buttons until he found a station that was playing dance music. Dorothy had not moved any closer to him in all this while; she sat next to the door, her hand still on the handle. He had to discuss money and what the national association wanted them to do, if for no other reason than that he would need her consent. But he disliked beginning.

"There is something you haven't told me," Dorothy said.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know what I mean; how could I? But I do know when you are holding back." Dorothy drew in her breath harshly. "Is there something Dr. Bray has said that you haven't told me?"

"Yes, in a way."

"About Jamey?"

"Not about—about what you think. Not actually." Bob wished he had insisted on going to a bar or a restaurant; it was hard to talk to Dorothy about money at such a time, and it would have helped if he could have had a drink.

"You have something to say that you are sure I won't like," Dorothy said. "I wish you wouldn't keep on about it, whatever it is, leading up to it." She stopped suddenly, bowing her head, then continued so quietly that Bob had to strain to hear. "I can take it, I can take anything—except not knowing. I've been expecting—expecting something else. I knew it wasn't over, that there had to be worse to come. If only you wouldn't try to hide things from me."

"No one has hidden anything from you," Bob said. "You'll have to let me tell you about it in my own way, though, so you'll understand why I even consider such a step."

"A step?" she asked hollowly.

"Dottie, we haven't talked about the money side of Jamey's illness for a long time."

She turned about fiercely, her mouth open and teeth shining. "You told me there was enough; you said not to worry."

"I couldn't have you bothering yourself about finances when it was all you could do to keep on going from day to day. I didn't want you to think of expense so long as there was anything we could do that might have made a difference." Bob hesitated; he was finding it even harder to come around to his subject than he had imagined.

"You've gone into debt," Dorothy said.

"I was already in debt," he reminded her. "When we first got the diagnosis last summer, we still owed a year's payments on the car." He smoothed the steering-wheel with the palm of his hand. "I've gone to the bank, more than one bank, and a loan company since then. I've used up every cent of my salary. We're in pretty deep."

"Not so deep you can't pay it off—we can't pay it off," Dorothy said. "If that's all that's wrong, I can take a job. I couldn't get my old job back, but I could find one that

paid as much, probably even more, in times like these. Elizabeth's at school, but Mother could come in every afternoon until I returned. It would work out."

She was relieved and almost cheerful. She had spoken quickly, sincerely. He saw that her eyes had brightened and that she had managed to smile.

"I'm afraid it's not that easy, Dot," he said to her. "You see, the bank won't lend me any more money. If you had a job now—but you don't—we might wangle a couple of hundred more. That wouldn't even be enough to cover Dr. Bray's bill, not that he has asked."

"You mean you haven't even been paying the doctor?" Dorothy asked in alarm.

"It's been all I could do to meet the hospital bills. Do you realize how much those treatments cost? Each week there have been laboratory fees, money for special nurses—you must know how much I'm paying Nurse Clark—and all our other bills go on. I haven't paid a department store in months."

"Bob, you should have told me sooner."

"I wouldn't be telling you now, if I could avoid it," he said. "I've never wanted money to come between us, and I won't let it."

Dorothy slid her hand along the seat toward him; he took it and held it tightly. "What are we going to do?" she asked. "We have to give Jamey a good Christmas."

"The national association is willing to help us financially," Bob said. He felt her hand close within his own. "At first I refused; then I said I'd discuss it with you."

"Who told you about this?" she asked.

"Dr. Bray—it was at the hospital the other day, after the last examination, while you were with Jamey. He asked me if I would talk with him and the social worker. They explained that the hospital wouldn't even have the equipment—that tremendous X-ray, the laboratory and

all—if it wasn't for the association. The way the doctor put it, there didn't seem to be much doubt that we had a responsibility to the national association to do as they asked."

Dorothy did not speak; she seemed not to have heard. Bob decided to wait her out. He could not guess her thoughts, so anything he said might be the wrong thing. When the doctor had made the suggestion to him, Bob remembered his own resentment. He had grown used to the idea, but he still did not like it, even if it was necessary. He should have had this talk with his wife sooner.

"Just what are they asking?" Dorothy turned her head slowly so that the blue of her eyes, shadowed in the indirect light, attracted and held his own glance. He knew her dread, her loss. "Tell me everything; I just don't want to be fooled again."

"There isn't much to tell, Dot," he said. "The association will pay the freight, if we let them publicize Jamey's Christmas celebration. That's about the size of it."

"Publicize?"

"Have some reporters come around and talk with us, take some pictures of Jamey. When people start sending letters and presents, take some more pictures of him opening them under the tree. That kind of thing."

"They are suggesting that we take advantage of Jamey's last Christmas, is that it?" Dorothy asked. Her nails dug into the flesh of his hand, but her face was expressionless.

"Not exactly. They wouldn't do anything undignified. The way Dr. Bray explained it, the association would benefit, for wealthy people would increase their contributions. You've got to reach their hearts."

"Not with Jamey's Christmas," Dorothy cried. "No, Bob, you're out of your mind. I won't allow it!"

"It was Dr. Bray's idea," Bob said. "He knows how

much it's costing." Bob would have given anything to have been able to drop the subject.

"All he is thinking about is collecting what we owe him," said Dorothy.

"You aren't being fair," Bob said. "I don't think that has crossed his mind; he has certainly never mentioned bills to me."

"Bob, tell me this: you haven't committed us?"

"No—not yet."

"What do you mean by 'not yet'?"

"I said I'd have to talk it over with you."

"You're trying to tell me that it's all but decided."

"We can't very well say no."

Dorothy tore her hand from his grasp. She huddled in the corner of the seat, as though expecting a blow. "Have you considered—have you and Miss McIntyre discussed—what all this publicity will do to our daughter?"

"I didn't say anything about the association to Miss McIntyre," Bob said. "She'd be against it, no doubt. Dot, I don't like the idea any better than you. It won't be good for Liz, for any of us. But if it's the only way I can give Jamey a good Christmas——"

"We don't have to spend a lot of money, or any money," Dorothy said. "A tree doesn't cost much; I've saved the ornaments. A few toys from the dime store. The family near him—a good time. That's what Jamey wants; he is only a little boy; he doesn't know anything about the value of presents."

Bob shook his head. "Dot, I'm not denying any of what you say. I've told myself all these arguments, believe me. But you just don't understand what I'm trying to tell you——"

"No, I'm afraid I don't," his wife said coldly.

"Do you know how much we're paying Miss Clark a week?"

"You told me—too much. I was shocked."

"We couldn't have a trained nurse for less. And the hospital insisted he couldn't go home without a registered nurse at least at nights." Bob hesitated, looking out at the street, where it had begun to rain, thinking that one of these days it would snow.

"And the injections?" he asked. "Do you know how much they cost? And the tests go on? There may be more transfusions?"

"What are you trying to say?" asked Dorothy.

"That we had no choice. Or only one choice. We could give Jamey a last Christmas, and the national association some publicity—or we could have kept him in that hospital ward. I'm not saying we did right. I'm not sure it wouldn't have been better if Jamey had stayed——"

"Isn't there some other way we could raise the money?"

"I've borrowed all I can; I've even borrowed on my salary."

"Mother would be glad——"

"Your mother needs every penny of that annuity; it was little enough when your father died ten years ago—but today!"

"Oh," Dorothy said. She moved closer to him, letting her head fall upon his shoulder. "There must be some other way—there must!"

Chapter 6

"SAY it again, Grandma. Please." Jamey jumped up and down in his crib, he was so excited.

Grandma Tompkins pursed her lips and puffed out her fat cheeks until she looked like the old hoot owl in one of Jamey's books. Her eyes were bright and blue, and they seemed to laugh all by themselves. "I don't know why you want me to repeat that old saying," Grandma sighed.

"Please," Jamey coaxed. "Yesterday you said you would."

"Well, all right." Grandma sank down upon the little rocking chair she had placed beside Jamey's crib, folded her arms in her broad lap and pursed her lips once more. "This world . . . and the next . . . and then——"

"And then the firecrackers!" Jamey shouted. His cheeks were highly flushed and his eyes shone with delight. He bounded up, lost his balance and tumbled into a heap. "And then the *fireworks*," Grandma corrected.

"And then the fireworks," Jamey said. "Grandma, are fireworks the same as firecrackers?"

"They can be, and then, again, sometimes they are not."

"Why?"

"Firecrackers are only those little red things that go off with a bang," Grandma explained. "Small boys like them and practically no one else. La-aw! I remember the time your Uncle Ed set one off underneath the porch when I was entertaining the Ladies' Missionary Society to afternoon tea. Never heard such a racket in your life. Nancy

Weeks dropped her teeth into her cup, she was so surprised, and then tried to look as if nothing had happened. The cat—he was a real tortoise-shell, that cat—he lit out from the porch rail where he was asleep—he gave such a jump he went clear across the yard and landed in the street, landed a-running and we never did see him as long as we lived in that house. Firecrackers!—I'm glad they made them against the law."

Jamey's grandma began to rock back and forth. Her eyes were half-closed as she remembered, and her iron-grey curls would bob each time the chair went back as far as it could and began to come forward. "But fireworks can be mighty pretty," she said. "Grandpa and I used to go on the Shriners' outing each Fourth of July, sometimes on Labour Day too. Just when it was beginning to get dark and you was all full of clam pie and chowder and old-fashioned biscuits and johnnycake—just when you had found yourselves a bench and was sitting real quiet thinking about spooning a little, maybe—there would be a sssss!—and a boom!—and an aaah!—and there the fireworks would be, spinning up like stars over the lagoon, as pretty as any jewellery or pictures you ever did see!"

"What would they be like?" Jamey asked.

"They would be like all kinds of things. Some, as I've been telling you, were like stars bursting and scattering all across the evening sky. Then there were ones that seemed to be fountains of gold and silver, and others that twisted and turned, shook and rattled, regular fiery serpents. I think I used to like the Catherine wheels best—they usually went off next to last, a-whirling like mad things with an American flag in their middle, but the Niagara Falls were nice, too, and so was George Washington Crossing the Delaware—only the last time I saw him, the wind was blowing the wrong way and you could hardly even make out his boat, it was so smoky. La-aw!"

Jamey gazed at his grandmother and tried to decide which of the many questions he wanted to ask was most important. Whenever grandma told him about all the wonderful things that had happened to her, it was like that. Questions would keep popping into Jamey's mind, chasing each other around until he was all mixed up. But this time it was not too hard to decide: one question was much more important than all the rest.

"Grandma," he asked, "why this world . . . and then the next . . . and not until then the fireworks?"

"Honey, like I been telling you, I don't rightly know." Grandma blew out her cheeks and shook her head. "It's just a saying I heard once."

"But you and Grandpa saw the fireworks, didn't you, Grandma? Was that in the next world, and the next?"

"La-aw, no, honey! That was right here, a long time ago, at the Shriners' outing on the Fourth of July." Grandma chuckled.

Jamey was quiet. He gazed at her, and she could see him thinking. It did not seem right to her that the child should think so hard. Grandma reached down into the crib and picked up Jamey and hugged him close to her. She was warm and soft and she smelled of lavender, and Jamey liked to be held by her.

"But after this world, and the next, there is a place for the fireworks, isn't there, Grandma? You said so, didn't you?"

"Honey, that's only an old saying that don't make any sense. I don't understand what come over me to repeat it to you. It's just a funny old thing people say, child, and don't mean anything by it. Never you fear."

"I'm not afraid, Grandma," Jamey said, burying his face in her sweet-smelling bosom so that she heard his voice faint and deep inside her. He seemed closer to her than ever before: he was part of her.

"Grandma——?" Jamey began.

"What do you want to know now, honey?"

"Grandma, if you are a bad boy, Santa Claus will only leave you a bundle of sticks, won't he?"

"That's what people say. But I never knew it to happen to a single child, and I can tell you I've known some pretty bad ones in my time."

"Lizbeth says that's what happens. Lizbeth says it happens all the time," Jamey told her.

"Your sister don't know what she's talking about," Grandma Tompkins exclaimed. "She is just talking big, repeating what she has heard said, without rightly knowing what she is saying. The next time she talks big like that you tell her your grandma said it isn't so. And don't you go worrying your little head about any such nonsense."

"She says it happened to her once," Jamey said. "She said her stocking was full of sticks."

"I don't know what gets into that child," Grandma said. "I can tell you that child has had only happy Christmases. Maybe she ought to get a bundle of sticks this Christmas."

"Lizbeth says that Christmas doesn't come next, Grandma. She says it isn't so that I'm home for Christmas. Teacher says it isn't so."

All of a sudden Grandma was holding Jamey tighter than ever, kissing his cheeks and his forehead, crooning to him as if he were a little baby. Her kisses were all warm and wet, and Jamey was not sure he liked them very much.

"Don't you worry your poor head about when your Christmas is coming," Grandma was saying. "And don't you go listening to that sister of yours—I'll teach that young miss a thing or two! She don't know what she is saying. She just talks to hear herself make a noise, that's all. You listen to what your mother and father, what your

old grandma tells you—and don't you pay attention to anyone else. Because they don't know—other people just don't understand, that's all."

It was always like that when you asked grown-ups questions. You did not find out anything. They never told you what you wanted to know.

The afternoon sun was hot in the living-room, the sharp bands of it sparkling with dust motes. Jamey was taking a nap, and Grandma Tompkins had come in to sit for a while and rest her feet, but when she saw how much dust there was in the air she could not sit still. She found a dust-cloth in the kitchen and came back and began to rub it over the furniture. You could not expect Dorothy to keep a spic-and-span house with all the troubles she had, but how could she live in a place that was so dusty?

After she had dusted only half the room she felt her breath catch and felt the ache in that spot in her back that never seemed to be there when she touched it. She knew she would have to straighten up and stand quiet for a little, or it would only get worse. As she was always telling Mr. Timothy Riggs, you had to watch out for yourself when you got to be their age, nobody was going to watch out for you.

Grandma Tompkins went to the window and pulled back the curtain. She thought maybe she might see the children's car turning the corner, but there was not a car in sight. It was late too, after four o'clock. When Dorothy had left that morning she had said she would be back by the middle of the afternoon. Grandma hoped that she had let Bob persuade her to take in a movie or do something else she liked. It was not good for any person to stay shut up, even in a bad time like this.

Mrs. Tompkins thought she heard Jamey waking. She went softly into his room, but he was lying fast asleep

on his stomach, his little rear hiked up. Such an uncomfortable way to sleep, but Dorothy said it was natural for him, that he had always slept so. None of her children had ever slept upon their faces, or if they had and she found them, she had turned them over for fear they might smother. But these days people had such funny ideas of how to bring up children.

She went back into the living-room and sat down on the sofa, only then realizing that she still had the dust cloth in her hand. Well, she would rest a little and then finish giving things a wipe. She was not right in her mind about that boy and the queer questions he had been asking. When you came right down to it, his grandma was not at all sure she knew how she felt about her little fellow and the bad sickness he had.

It was not as if she made a habit of avoiding what was unpleasant. As she had been telling Mr. Timothy Riggs only the other night, it had been her practice all her life to face the truth and make the best of it. "But somehow it's like I didn't want to know all about that child and my daughter's trouble," she had said.

Mr. Timothy Riggs lived in the apartment on the other side of the hall from hers. He lived all alone except for a canary bird that refused to sing. Mr. Timothy Riggs had paid twelve dollars and ninety-five cents for that canary bird, a guaranteed to sing or your money back Harz Mountain Roller. The crazy bird would twitter, and Mr. Timothy Riggs had trained it to eat right out of your hand, but it refused to sing. And he wouldn't take it back. "It's company, Dicky is; he don't need to sing none," Mr. Timothy Riggs would say.

He was a pretty poor imitation of an old man, and Mrs. Tompkins was sorry for him. All he had to fix a decent meal with in that apartment of his was a teentsy two-burner hot-plate you could hardly burn beans on. He was

straight as a stick and with no more flesh on him, and he was always going out for the paper or down to the corner to the Horn & Hardant for a container of stew or some of their macaroni, half the time forgetting his hat or his rubbers or his umbrella.

So, whenever she could persuade him, Mrs. Tompkins would invite him in for a cup of tea and a Danish. They would sit and talk, although most of the time Mr. Timothy Riggs only listened—which was all right with her. They were the same age, just as her Tom and herself had been born within a month of each other; only Mr. Timothy Riggs had not been a business-man like her Tom. He had been a chauffeur, driven for some of the very best families—but from what he said, the things that went on in the back of cars—la-aw!

Mr. Timothy Riggs had sat at her kitchen-table just the other night, his bony hand folded over his teacup to keep in the warmth, his long jaws chomping on the nice onion roll she had saved for him. "It's like I'd just as soon forget about it," she had told him, "and it's wrong of me, Jamey being my only grandson, and lucky I am to have the one, Dorothy, coming so late in my life."

Mr. Timothy Riggs had stopped chewing while he considered what she had said. He was a man who gave his attention to one matter at a time. "It is not unusual for a child to die young," he had said, his voice creaking resonantly. "I have seen many a young corpse. It is my opinion that the Maker hath a passion for young souls."

"Now is that a nice thing to say to a poor woman who is only trying to be hospitable?" Mrs. Tompkins had inquired. Actually, the sepulchral tone of his voice had sent a thrill through her. He had sounded like an old-time preacher.

"So pure. So innocent. Such beautiful deaths," Mr. Timothy Riggs had added, only after swallowing the last

of his roll and licking the butter from each spatulate finger.

"I can't see anything beautiful in death," Mrs. Tompkins had said. "Uugh! I don't like to think of it."

The old man had raised his hand to silence her. "It is not the fashion to regard our own imminent dissolution," he had said. "The times persuade us not to think of our ultimate deliverance. I believe we should prepare for the event; we must compose ourselves for all eternity."

"How you do go on!" she had exclaimed. "But what has any of that to do with the poor little boy, not old enough even to know the meaning of your words?"

"He is of sufficient age, or our Lord would not take him," said Mr. Timothy Riggs.

"You give me the shudders. You make the last Nod sound like an honour and a privilege."

"It is nothing less," the old man had agreed. "It is the Peace that passeth understanding. It is the forgiveness of Lethe."

"It's nothing of the sort," said Mrs. Tompkins. "It's a horrible accident, a thing I don't even want to think of happening to me. I raised a healthy family, all of them alive to tell the tale. Only poor Tom is gone, and he fought it like a madman, I can assure you. It's too bad you couldn't have taken his place, if you have such a taste for it."

"It is the one journey we must undertake alone," said Mr. Timothy Riggs, "the one way to which there is no guide."

She remembered that she had glared at him and she had been tempted to tell him to leave and not come back. But he was a poor old thing and usually a good listener; she could not remember that he had ever talked this much before. "You aren't too far gone for a second cup of tea, I'm sure," she had said instead.

Now while she was resting on the sofa, watching the sun's stroke advance across the floor, thinking how many times she had watched days wane, Mr. Timothy Riggs' words rang in her mind like a sword upon stone. There might come a time when it would be good to have a day end and know there would not be another, a time to welcome a night that could never end. But even as she admitted the possibility, she felt bewildered by her own submission and knew that there was a great dread inside her that she must push back into its hiding-place.

Heaving a sigh, she busied herself again with the dust-cloth. Mrs. Tompkins understood the necessity of giving yourself wholly to a task to escape thought. She worked at each surface of the room with the concentration of an artist, her eyes entirely upon the cloth in her hand, the tiny particles that marred the chairs and tables, the bookcases and picture-frames. The children were in the house, Bob helping Dorothy off with her coat, throwing his own things across the room to land helter-skelter upon the sofa, and Mrs. Tompkins had not heard the car in the drive, had not even been aware of the front door's opening.

"I'm going to have a drink; I need one," Bob said. His face was flat and colourless and his hair was mussed as if he had been running his hand through it. "Do you want me to make you one, dear?"

"No, thanks," Dorothy said. She stood listlessly in the centre of the room looking around. "Mother, you dusted. You shouldn't have bothered, but it was nice."

"Jamey's taking a good nap, and I wanted something to do," said Mrs. Tompkins. "I'm too old a body to sit around and amuse myself."

"I know I'm letting the house go, that I'll never catch up," Dorothy said. "But, Mother, what's the use?"

"There's your husband to think of—and Elizabeth. Where is Elizabeth? She didn't come in with you?"

Dorothy went to the window and rearranged the curtains that her mother had pulled aside a few minutes before. "We were late calling for her at school. Miss McIntyre said she had started for home with some other children. You don't have to worry, Mother; Liz will be here eventually. She can take hours walking those eight blocks."

"I wasn't worried. I thought you might have forgotten and I could go for her," the grandmother said. Dorothy looked tired, and that was to be expected, but she was more tired than she had appeared up to these last few days. Sooner or later she would tell her mother what was troubling her—ever since she had been a little girl she always had—but it would be better for her if she could talk it all out now.

"Has something else gone wrong?" Mrs. Tompkins asked, just sharply enough perhaps to startle whatever it was out of her. "You never did tell me where you and Bob were off to in such a hurry today."

"Let Bob tell you," Dorothy said. She left off fussing with the curtain and went over to the sofa to pick up the coats her husband had thrown there. She stood with them over her arm, looking blankly about her. "Mother, I don't know what I should do any more."

"You've done enough," Mrs. Tompkins said, wishing as she spoke that she could sound more sympathetic. Even as a schoolgirl, Dorothy had been inclined to go on too much about her worries. "You've done all you can."

"I keep telling myself that. It doesn't do any good."

Mrs. Tompkins took the coats from her and hung them in the hall closet. Dorothy's was a nice mouton, bought the previous year. She wondered how long Bob had been wearing that topcoat; the collar and shoulders had turned a different colour from the rest of it.

When she came back into the living-room, Dorothy was

still standing where she had left her. She had a drink in her hand, which Bob had prepared anyway. Bob was sitting in his chair, his long legs crossed; he had already finished half his own drink.

"That awful man," Dorothy said. "I hate him."

"He was just doing his job, honey," Bob said. "It's a business to him. He had to ask those questions. You can't expect them to go into a thing like this without knowing where they are, what to expect. For all he knew we were phonies."

"I didn't expect him to do anything," Dorothy said. "If I'd had any say in the matter, we'd never have gone there today." She looked at her drink and then put it down on a coffee-table without tasting it. "Mother was asking questions. I told her you would tell her."

Bob smiled at his mother-in-law. He had a good deal of liking for Mrs. Tompkins; sometimes he thought he liked her better than Dorothy did. Or it could be that it was the other way around: Mrs. Tompkins might like him better than her daughter. Such things were always hard to determine, and he was not inclined to bother with them, but he had noticed more than once that his mother-in-law appeared to be somewhat critical of his wife.

"We were down at the headquarters of the national association today, Grandma," he said, "talking with the public-relations man. They want to release a story to the newspapers about Jamey. You know, they want the reporters to write about our bringing him home for an early Christmas and——"

Dorothy jumped up and ran from the room, her sudden action interrupting her husband. She came back in a moment shaking her head. "I could have sworn I heard him stirring in there. But he seems to be fast asleep. Mother, you have no idea how hard it is to tell sometimes whether Jamey is really sleeping or not. I think there are

times, when he is feeling the worst, that he pretends to be sleeping just to keep from worrying us."

"I tell her that's nonsense," Bob said. "Jamey isn't any super-sensitive adult—he is an ordinary four-year-old. When he hurts he cries."

"It must be nice to be so sure about everything," Dorothy said, her voice thickening. "I only wish I could be so sure."

"The last time I looked at him, Jamey was taking a good nap," Mrs. Tompkins said. She turned to Bob. "Go on with what you were saying about this publicity."

Bob spread his hands, then brought them together into fists. He had been ignoring his drink since he set it down. "There isn't much else—I don't think we would even have considered their proposition, though maybe we ought to, if it wasn't for the money angle."

"There's no use putting a good face on it, Mother," Dorothy said. "I'll tell you if Bob won't. We're head over heels in debt."

"I should think you might be," Mrs. Tompkins said promptly, "what with all those hospital bills and everything. I've been wondering for months how you two were getting along."

Dorothy ran toward her mother, as though she might fling herself into her mother's arms; but she stopped short. "Bob didn't let me know anything about it until last night," she said. "He might have told me how things were."

You know how to count, don't you? Mrs. Tompkins thought, but did not say. She eyed her daughter and wondered if what was coming out now was the root of her trouble. If it was only money——

"I didn't want to bother you," Bob was saying. "You had more than enough to worry you."

"If it's money, Son," Mrs. Tompkins said, turning to

Bob, "I've been able to put a little by out of what the insurance company pays me each month; I've been doing it for quite some time. It isn't a lot, but you are welcome to it."

Bob took the rest of his drink. His face that had been pale now showed an unhealthy flush. "Thank you," he said, "but it isn't necessary. Dottie is looking for something to worry about. We owe some bills, sure, but not as much as all that. We can swing it without going into your reserve. The national association has just about promised to help."

"They are going to investigate us," Dorothy said. She had sat down again and was swinging one crossed leg idly, almost as though she must attract attention to herself. "And if we pass the investigation they may be able to offer us 'some form of financial assistance' if we are willing to co-operate with them on their publicity."

She jerked her head up and stared at her husband. "I'm not going to accept their charity, Bob, and that's final."

"Why should they have to investigate you?" her mother asked calmly.

Bob stood up and walked over to the fireplace, hunching his back against the mantel. "Mr. Eldridge—he's the one who handles public relations for the association—did use the word," he admitted. "But I don't think he intended it in the sense Dottie took it."

"What did he mean then?" Dorothy asked quickly. "Isn't that what they do to anybody who asks for relief, send some social worker around to ask questions?"

"You forget that the national association knew nothing about Jamey's case until Dr. Bray spoke to them a few days ago," Bob replied. "I think what Eldridge intended when he used that word—and I only heard him use it once was that he wanted to check up on the medical aspects, Bray's diagnosis, the hospital charts, things of that kind."

“But why should he do that?”

“If the association is going to publicize a case, they have to be damned sure the facts are what they say they are—that’s all. Dottie, you have no idea how a thing like this could backfire if it turned out that Jamey——”

His wife’s eyes flared and the cords of her throat tightened. “You’re saying that the association wants to make certain that our little boy is really going to die——”

“Dottie, be reasonable. I’m only trying to clear up a mistake you are making and attempting to answer a question of your mother’s.” Bob approached her; but then seeing how rigidly she stood, her head turned away from him, he remained uneasily in the centre of the room.

“No one is going to make you do anything you don’t want to do,” he said. “I thought it was a way of helping us financially, a way that couldn’t do Jamey any real harm. But if you are so dead set against it—well, we’ll just have to work things out some other way, that’s all.”

Dorothy was breathing heavily. She stood unsteadily. One arm was stiff at her side, the fingers of that hand widespread. She held her other arm behind her back. “I’d rather die,” she cried loudly. “I’d rather die myself first!”

She ran from the room and out into the hall. Bob and Mrs. Tompkins watched her flee up the stairs, nearly falling in her haste, catching at the banister, lunging on up out of sight.

They looked at each other, both trying to think of something to say.

Chapter 7

ELIZABETH was taking Alice upstairs to the hospital in the attic. Alice did not want to go, but she had been a bad girl, she had made her mother crying sick, and now she had to have an operation to make her stay good. It had all been decided.

"It won't do you any good to stamp your feet and put your fingers in your mouth like a little tiny baby," Elizabeth told Alice. "It's not as if I haven't told you time and again that either you would have to behave yourself, or you would have to have an operation. No matter how much I talked to you, no matter how hard I tried to explain things, you wouldn't listen. There's only one thing left for me to do, and that's to take you to the hospital, whether you like or not. We can't have a bad girl like you in *our* house."

Alice kept dragging one plastic foot, and some of the water Elizabeth had just fed her, with one of the dolly nursing-bottles Grandma had given Elizabeth for her birthday, kept dribbling from her and making a messy wet streak upon the attic stairs. "Look at you," Elizabeth exclaimed, shaking the arm she held tightly between her fingers so that Alice's whole body jerked back and forth, "just look at how dirty you are! What am I ever going to do with you?"

Her father had not got around to finishing the attic, and the top of the stairs was shut off by a heavy door that lay flush with the ceiling. For a long time Elizabeth had thought there was no way of climbing into the attic, but then one day she had found that the door was not fastened.

You had to push hard to loosen it, had to stand on the uppermost step and make yourself as tall as you could, right up on tippy-toes—and when the door gave it fell over on to the loose board floor of the attic with a frightening bang. But it was dark and quiet up there, and nobody knew what you were doing; it would be a fine hospital for Alice.

As soon as Elizabeth had the door open, she grabbed Alice by the leg and flung her into the attic. "There, you bad girl!" she cried, "that's what you get for not listening to your mother."

She went over to where the naked plastic doll lay sprawled, legs akimbo, one arm pinned behind its back, in the far corner under the sloping rafters. Elizabeth stood with her arms upon her hips, her own legs widespread in a doughty stance, and regarded Alice.

"You needn't think I'd bother with you if you weren't my own little girl and I didn't love you so much," Elizabeth said. "But look at you! You've torn all your dresses so you don't have a thing to wear, your hair isn't even the same pretty colour it was, and there's hardly any left - you're dirty and you don't listen to what I tell you. It's a wonder I put up with you."

Elizabeth knelt beside the doll. She took one of its small hands delicately between her own fingers, then slowly bent it back from the wrist until the surface began to peel from the pressure. "You've got a fever. You're a very sick child—and bad, too. That's why you are going to stay here in the hospital for ever and ever and ever and ever——"

Suddenly Elizabeth stiffened, her mouth dropped open and an expression of make-believe horror appeared upon her face. "Why, I don't believe you are my own pretty little girl any more," she said in hushed tones. "I believe you've turned into that awful Jamey, that bad little boy

who makes his mother crying sick. I hate you and I'm going to kill you. I'm going to tear off your arms—yes, first your arms—and then your legs—one by one, first your left leg and then your right leg. I'm going to pull out your hair and punch in your eyes. And I'm going to give you an operation to make you stay good even after you're dead."

Elizabeth jumped up and turned her back upon the doll. She lifted one leg slowly, then put it down and lifted the other. It was a slow dance in a circle, made erratic by the uneven, wide-spaced boards of the rough attic floor. Every few steps Elizabeth would shoot up one hand, fingers wiggling, high above her head in a gesture that mingled propitiation with defiance. And she kept up a steady chant: "It hurts you more than it does me, so I'm going to make you good and dead if it's the last thing I do on this earth because you won't listen to me any other way——"

After a while Elizabeth seemed to tire of this rite, and she sank into a cross-legged position directly across the dark and dusty attic from where the doll lay sprawled. She did not look at the doll, though, but began a conversation with herself, her voice rising and falling in a casual rhythm similar to that of her chant.

"They said you were sick, and I had to be very good and quiet so I wouldn't disturb you. All the time I had to go out and play, even if I didn't want to, because you were sick. I couldn't bring any of my kids into the house because they said they couldn't have any noise with you so sick."

She clapped her hands together loudly and shook her head, first from side to side, then up and down. "They sent you to the hospital, that's what they did. They said it was because you were so sick, but I know what it really was. I know it really was because you were so bad, because you made my mother so crying sick; they sent you

to the hospital so you could have an operation that would kill you and make you good."

Elizabeth bent her head forward until her curly bob fell in tangles around her knees. "They brought you home and said you were going to be sick for a very long time and that no matter what happened I mustn't talk to anybody, anybody at all about it. You were coming home for Christmas they said, but teacher says that it won't be Christmas for a long, long time yet, days and days and days. And then you made my mother crying sick again and the doctor had to come, and then all the other people started to come to our house, all the people who asked questions and made big flashes of light and took pictures. And all the time I have to keep very quiet or I have to go out to play when there's nobody to play with. All the kids say they won't play with me because I'm stuck up because you're going to die. But I'm not stuck up and I hate you, and I'm going to give you an operation to make you stay dead and good."

Elizabeth stood, moving slowly and portentously. She took a pair of small, blunt scissors from the triangular pocket of her dress. These were the scissors that had come with her latest set of paper dolls. She held the scissors in her fist and held her fist above her head, her arm rigid and extended to its full length.

She walked slowly across the uneven boards, her eyes fixed upon the doll under the eaves. But when she reached the doll, she fell down beside it in a huddle, sobbing. The scissors dropped out of her hand and were lost in a crack between the boards.

Alice continued to lie as before, her unfocused glass eyes staring askance at the slanting rafters, the stuffings of rock-wool insulation that hung between them like Spanish moss, a spider dangling, swinging crazily from his web.

Downstairs, the reporters and photographers had gone. Mrs. Tompkins was bending over, straightening up the mess they had made of the living-room. She had accumulated three waste-paper baskets full of flash bulbs, and now she was starting on the ash-trays crammed with dead cigars, paper cartons and empty cigarette packages. The glasses in which Bob had served the Press drinks were in every conceivable place around the room, on the mantel, under chairs, on top of the television set—one had been spilled upon a glass-topped coffee-table and the liquid had seeped under the glass. This meant taking everything off the table, lifting up the glass and wiping it bone-dry underneath, or it would stain.

She did not mind the work of cleaning up; she was only glad that there was something she could do to help. The longer she lived, the less she seemed to know about people, even her own daughter. Last night she had been worried about how Dorothy was going to face this day. She had said as much to Mr. Timothy Riggs: "That girl of mine takes things too hard. Ever since she was in short dresses, playing with dolls, Dorothy's had a knack of going on too much about things it doesn't do any good to go on about. I remember once she had the mumps and couldn't go to a school picnic she had been looking forward to for weeks. I had to keep her home in bed; there was nothing else I could do—I couldn't have let her go anyway and give all her schoolmates her sickness. Well, you never heard such a fuss in all your life. She cried all one day and all that night, too; even her father wasn't able to do a thing with her. And it was the way she cried, you'd think she had stopped because you couldn't hear her—but then you would look at her and you could see her biting her lip, holding it in, the crying all deep inside her, the tears pouring in regular freshets down her poor cheeks. Dorothy was always like that, from a little baby on."

Mr. Timothy Riggs had sucked at his tea. He could make more commotion drinking one poor cup of tea than any man Mrs. Tompkins had ever met. "Some of us are naturally of a melancholy turn," he had said. "It takes all kinds to make a world."

"It does at that," she had agreed. "But I can tell you my daughter is only making herself sick the way she is carrying on about her Jamey. He's my only grandson, and I feel as badly about what's happening to him as a grandmother could."

"That poor little tyke, so short a time on this earth," she had sighed. "Even Dorothy knows how badly I feel about poor Jamey, but I don't take on about it the way she does. You know, sometimes I wonder if there isn't something she thinks she has done or something she ought to have done for him and didn't do that makes Dorothy that way. At times I get the feeling that it's almost as if she thought Jamey's trouble was all her fault."

"The beginning of this life is the beginning of responsibility," Mr. Timothy Riggs had said, taking his third *schnecken*. "Our guilt ends but with the grave."

"You are the cheerful one," Mrs. Tompkins had said. "I can always rely on you for a good laugh, if nothing else."

"Merriment is too often the guise of hypocrisy," said the old man.

"A good laugh never hurt anybody," she had said. "But what's worrying me is no laughing matter. I'm concerned about how Dorothy is going to act tomorrow, when that Mr. Eldridge has all those reporters and columnists up to their house. I'm not sure I'm welcome, but I'm going to be there so that however that daughter of mine carries on there's some sane person about the house to see to it that the little boy is all right."

Mr. Timothy Riggs had offered his services as an

escort, but Mrs. Tompkins had declined them. She could just see him, sitting like a stick upon the edge of the sofa, his umbrella between his legs—if it was a sunny day he was never without it, but just let it rain and he would go down to the corner without even a hat—as solemn as the tomb. He was all Dorothy would need for a real case of hysteria.

Mrs. Tompkins put the last waste-basket into place and began to gather up the dirty glasses. Well, you never could tell about people, even your own daughter. There had certainly been a change in Dorothy that day. And who could have expected it, after the way her daughter had acted only a few days before when she had come home late in the afternoon from the conference with the man at the national association?

Mrs. Tompkins winced as she thought of the scene Dorothy had made with her husband. Bob had only been trying to be reasonable, trying to explain to his wife and mother-in-law why he just about had to accept the help of the association on their terms. She would not be much of a mother if she had not been able to see Dorothy's side of it, but she could not understand why Dorothy had felt it was Bob's fault. The way her daughter had behaved had been inexcusable, exactly like the temper tantrums she used to throw when she was in high school and she would take it into her mind that her parents were wrong to deny her some favour.

There had been the time she had been invited to go to a fraternity dance and house party at a men's college in Massachusetts. The outfit she wanted for that dance would have set her father back at least a hundred dollars, but that was not the reason Tom had said no. Dorothy had only been sixteen then, and the boy who had asked had been a junior at college—a nice boy whose family lived in the same block, but too old for Dorothy, all the same. Tom had heard about the goings-on at those house parties,

a business-man gets to know the world and its ways. Mrs. Tompkins could hear him now, saying, "Dottie tells me there will be chaperones, but nobody can keep track of that many youngsters running around in cars on one of those wild week-ends. I'm not saying my daughter can't have a good time, but let her have it with someone her own age who will bring her home sober at a decent hour of the night."

Dorothy had shut herself in her room for three days. If she had left it, then it had been when everybody else was asleep. She had not eaten anything from a Friday morning until a Sunday night, and when she did come downstairs just before midnight that Sunday, her hair was untidy as if she had not combed it in all that while, her eyes were red and bulging and her bath-robe hung loose, the belt trailing. She had refused to speak with her own mother even then, and for a week or so afterwards she was sullen and had little to say. She had got over it, of course, as she always did, but her mother had not felt easy about her. It is bad enough to have to suffer disappointments in this world without punishing yourself over them, too.

So when Dorothy had run upstairs the other afternoon, and Bob and she had heard the door of the bedroom slam and the key turn in the lock, Mrs. Tompkins had said to herself with an inward sigh, "She never has got over those tantrums." But Jamey had begun to scream from his downstairs room, and they had gone in to find him all pale and terrified from his bad dream, so it was a good hour or so before Bob had remembered about Dorothy.

By that time Nurse Clark had arrived and Jamey was quiet—he liked that young woman so much; it was a good thing they had been able to arrange for her to come nights. Mrs. Tompkins had been in the kitchen, throwing something together for dinner, and Bob had been out in the back doing something at that garage he had been building

so long. She remembered that little Elizabeth had come in from play and was helping set the table.

The back door had slammed and Bob had entered the kitchen. He had a pipe in his mouth and his hands were dirty from whatever he had been doing; that was one good feature of the man: give him something to do about the house and no matter what had been bothering him he was as cheerful as a puppy dog in no time.

He had seen Elizabeth setting the table, though, and that she was at the stove. "Where's Dottie?" he had asked. "Don't tell me she is still upstairs?"

"I haven't gone up to her, if that's what you are asking," Mrs. Tompkins had told him.

His jaw had sagged and the pipe had hung from it like a question mark. "Somebody better had, don't you think?"

"I'm not the one to go interfering between husband and wife," she had said, "but since you've asked my opinion I'll tell you. Tom and I didn't use to go near her when she shut herself up like this. We'd wait her out; sooner or later she'd come down and join the family—and that was that."

The pipe had straightened itself up in his jaw again, and Mrs. Tompkins had seen that Bob had not liked her advice. "I think I'll go upstairs, anyway," he had said quietly.

He had come downstairs again almost immediately. "She wouldn't let me in," he had said. "She says she has a sick headache and wants to rest, if you'll stay and help with dinner." He had smiled as he had realized that the dinner was almost ready. "I'll put Elizabeth to bed," he had added.

"There's no need for that," Mrs. Tompkins had said. "And don't you worry about her, she'll get over it."

"I'm not sure she ought to get over it," Bob had said.

"Maybe she is right; maybe I ought to try to get along without the association's help."

"That's for you and your wife to decide. But she isn't helping you any upstairs in bed kicking her heels with the door locked." Mrs. Tompkins had hesitated, remembering how he had reacted to her advice before. She had decided that she had said enough. "She is my daughter, you know. I understand a thing or two about her."

Bob had grinned weakly and had run his hand through Elizabeth's hair, Elizabeth, who had been standing there quietly taking it all in. "And she is my wife," he had said.

The next that Mrs. Tompkins had heard was that Mr. Eldridge was holding a news conference at the Lewis house in a couple of days. Dorothy had told her as much over the telephone the afternoon of the day after her argument with her husband. "I guess we really don't have any choice," she had said to her mother, "and it will be better for Jamey than trying to skimp along without enough money to give him proper care."

Mrs. Tompkins had made up her mind that she would be at her daughter's house early on the day of the Press conference. She knew that it would do none of them any good if Dorothy expressed any of her resentments to the reporters. There could even be real trouble that her mother might be able to prevent.

She gathered all the dirty glasses—several times she thought she had all of them, but each time she found more, under chairs, behind the sofa, even inside the fireplace. She dumped them into the sink and let the water run until it was scalding. While she waited, she ran a finger along the drain-board to see if it was actually clean or only appeared to be. It was clean enough this time, but you could not tell in Dorothy's house.

You just could not tell about people anyway, no matter

how well you thought you knew them. Who would have been able to predict that when she pushed open the front door of the Lewis house this morning, she would see her daughter coming down the stairs looking a good ten years younger than she had the last time she had seen her? She looked not a day over twenty, and that was a fact.

Dorothy's blue eyes were rested, and the lines about her eyes had disappeared. She was wearing her good wool dress, and she must have given her amber hair a sound brushing, because it shone like fire.

"Mother, what are you doing here?" Dorothy cried in a voice that was gay, excited and perhaps more than a little tense. She ran forward to take both her mother's hands into her own.

"I wasn't invited, and that's a fact," Mrs. Tompkins said, "but I thought I'd better come."

"But, Mother, I'm glad you came. I'm sure Bob meant for you to be here. It's just that we've had so many things to do——" Her voice fell away and she looked around her. Her mother noticed that she was wearing ear-rings, great gold loops of ear-rings that bobbed as she moved her head. "Oh, Mother, there's so much to do yet—you can help me." Dropping her mother's hands, she ran, teetering upon high heels, into the living-room.

"Those chrysanthemums, I've put them there—but do you really think that vase is tall enough for them?" There were some beautiful, rust-coloured flowers upon the coffee-table, protruding from a vase that was both too squat and the wrong hue.

"If you'll let me get my coat off——" Mrs. Tompkins said, looking about the room she had never seen so orderly before. "And where is Jamey?"

"Mother, I am sorry; I wasn't thinking." Dorothy took her coat and ran with it to the hall closet. She did not

appear to be able to move at a slower pace; it was as if she were being driven.

"Jamey's in his room. The association sent another nurse to look after him this morning. I was wrong, Mother, they really have his best interests at heart."

Her voice came from inside the hall closet and was punctuated by the ringing clatter of hangers as they dropped on the floor. Even at that distance, the strained joyfulness was painful to hear.

When she came back into the room, her mother said, "That was thoughtful of them, I'll admit. But couldn't Nurse Clark have stayed over a few hours? Jamey is used to her——"

"Mother, you forget that Nurse Clark works nine to ten hours every night; it wouldn't be right. And Nurse Evans is so nice and competent. But, oh, I didn't tell you—Jamey is used to Nurse Evans, too. You see, she was working nights at the hospital when he was there—though now she is on days, and that's how the association was able to send her.

"You didn't tell me if the mums looked all right," Dorothy added. She had gone over to the mantel and was peering at her face in the mirror above it. "Mother, I do look a fright, don't I? I look just horrible."

"Except that your lipstick is about three shades too bright and you have entirely too much rouge on your cheeks—but I don't keep up with the fashions these days, I know, so don't tell me!—you look better than I've seen you in I don't know how long."

"Do I really, Mother?" Dorothy swung about upon one heel, smiling like an overpleased child. "Do I? And the chrysanthemums?"

"They could stand a taller vase and one that is more of a neutral colour," Mrs. Tompkins had said.

Dorothy was instantly perplexed, putting her thumb to

her mouth and stopping herself just in time from gnawing at the dark-red lacquer of her nail. Then she smiled. "I know exactly the thing—that crystal bowl one of Bob's relatives sent us that I've never been able to think what to do with!"

She ran from the room and was back almost before her mother could take a breath. The bowl was outsized, but it was good crystal and simple in design. Dorothy carefully took each of the long-stalked, heavy blooms from the smaller vase and laid them gently by the fireplace, then carefully decanted their water into the crystal bowl. As she arranged the mums, her mother noticed the self-conscious grace of her hands' gestures, as though she were an actress going about a bit of stage business.

"Those must have cost Bob a pretty penny," she said.

"Bob didn't send them," Dorothy told her. "He never thinks of flowers, even on my anniversary. Candy sometimes, or a show he wants to see himself—and if someone comes to our table when we are out for an evening, he may buy me a limp gardenia if he is badgered enough."

"Who did send them?"

"Mr. Eldridge. The man at the national association, you know. Wasn't it nice of him?" She stood back and regarded her efforts. "I here. I think they're beautiful now, don't you?"

"Lovely. It's early for mums of that size. Why did Eldridge send them to you?" There were times when Mrs. Tompkins' curiosity, to her own knowledge, outdid her tact. She hoped that this was not going to be one of them.

But the question did not embarrass her daughter. "I misjudged him, that's all," she said. She could not leave the blooms alone, but kept going back to them, moving one to this side, another the other way. "He sympathizes with us. He wants us to know he shares our feelings."

"Did he say all this, or did you hear it from the flowers?" her mother asked.

"He came to call last night. Bob was out, and he stayed only a few minutes." Dorothy glanced at her mother. Their eyes were level for a long instant, then Dorothy looked aside. "He knew I had received the wrong impression the other day. He wanted to correct it."

"The wrong impression about what?" her mother asked.

"About the association's intentions," Dorothy answered. "He knew I hadn't understood that they wouldn't do anything that wasn't in Jamey's best interests."

"Oh, I see," said Mrs. Tompkins. "What exactly did he say?"

Dorothy smiled gently, as if remembering something foolish she had done. "I don't blame you for being suspicious," she said, "because, you know, when I saw who it was at the door it was all I could do to be polite and ask him to come in."

"He did come in, though."

"Yes, he came in, but at first he wasn't even going to take off his hat and coat. He said he was only going to stay a few minutes. He had only come to see Jamey."

"Hadn't he seen your son before this?"

"No, Mother, he hadn't even heard of Jamey before Dr. Bray mentioned his case to the association. The way Dan Eldridge explained it to me last night, he has been so busy with all the detail of association work that on the day Bob and I first talked with him he was only familiar with the basic facts of the case. He knew about the diagnosis, the remission, how long Dr. Bray thinks Jamey has at the outside—and, well, that was about all he knew."

"And in the meantime he had gone to the trouble of informing himself?" Mrs. Tompkins asked.

"Mother, you sound so queer. Only a few days ago you were the one who seemed to me to be agreeing with Bob

and now that I admit I was mistaken, you are asking all sorts of questions." Dorothy picked a cigarette out of the box on the table and began to tap it against her wrist. "Really, I don't understand you."

"I'm only trying to find out what Eldridge said last night that so impressed you," Mrs. Tompkins said patiently.

"It wasn't anything so much that he *said*, Mother; it was more how he looked when I took him into Jamey's room. Jamey was asleep, and I refused to wake him, and Nurse Clark was sitting there reading. Dan took one look at Jamey and I saw that he understood. And you know what he did later, after we had left Jamey's room and were talking in the hall? He begged my pardon. He said he sometimes hated his job, although he did think as public-relations manager for the association he did more good than harm—and I told him I was sure he did. But he kept insisting that what he did wasn't altogether right, that that my maternal instinct had been far wiser than any man's common sense or the subtlest science. I'm telling you exactly what he said."

"I can see you are," her mother told her. Mrs. Tompkins wanted to say more to her daughter at that moment, but she realized that there was plenty of time for what she had to say. Right then, however it had occurred, it was better for the Lewis family that Dorothy accepted what the association was doing for them. It was probably better for her daughter, too; it did not do any good to fight a lost cause too long.

"I want to see my grandson myself this morning, before the house is filled with people," she said. "I'll just go in and talk to him for a minute, and then I'll come out and help you with whatever needs doing."

"He was having a grand time with Nurse Evans the last time I was in there," Dorothy said.

There were only a few times in her life that Mrs. Tompkins could ever have called herself a sneak, but this was one of them. She walked through the dining-room to the back hall, but she stopped in the hall as soon as she was certain she was out of her daughter's sight. The door to Jamey's room stood open and she was able to distinguish voices, Jamey's and that of a woman. Jamey was asking questions, and the woman was answering them. But Mrs. Tompkins was not able to hear well enough, so she walked quietly along the hall until she was so close to the door that she was afraid they could hear her breathe.

"There really is a place where the fire works, and it really burns you?" she heard Jamey asking.

Nurse Evans did not answer for some time. Mrs. Tompkins could imagine her confusion. Oh, why had she ever repeated that silly old saying to the child?

"Who has been telling you such stories?" Nurse Evans said.

"When my mommy dies, she isn't going to the bad place where the fire works, is she?"

"Your mommy isn't going to die soon, Jamey."

"But she is going to die?"

"All of us have to die some day, child."

"All of us?"

Mrs. Tompkins could barely keep herself from bursting into the room. But she did not want to embarrass the nurse, and she knew how difficult it could be to get Jamey off a subject.

"My mommy won't have to die before Christmas, will she?"

"Now don't you worry about your mother dying, Jamey," Nurse Evans said. "You just concentrate on getting well yourself."

Mrs. Tompkins knew then what was about to happen, and she started through the door as soon as she could. It

seemed to take an extraordinary long time for her to enter the room, long enough for Jamey to ask one more question, the one they had all been trying to keep him from asking.

“But I’m not going to die, am I, Nurse Evans?”

Chapter 8

"Of course, you are going to die!" Mrs. Tompkins cried, picking up Jamey from his crib and folding him into her arms. Better that he should hear it from his own grandma, than from a stranger. "All of us have to die some time, even your old gran!"

The nurse, a large woman in an immaculate, crisply starched uniform, had stepped back a pace as Mrs. Tompkins burst into the room. She watched as his grandma gave Jamey another bear hug and then put him down again in the crib, her smile polite, but stiff. "I was dressing him," she said. "His mother said he must be ready by ten o'clock."

Mrs. Tompkins knew that she had to keep talking. "Aren't you the fine one," she said to Jamey, shouldering past Nurse Evans, giving her a view of her back. "All dressed up in a new suit with a nice fresh collar and even a handkerchief in your pocket!" The truth was that Jamey looked slightly unhappy in the short trousers, tightly buttoned jacket and Eton collar. What had ever prompted Dorothy to buy such an outfit for a little boy?

"Why, you are all dressed up!" she continued. "All you need is to put your shoes on and let Grandma give your hair a good combing—and you'll be ready to see the President of the United States himself."

"Grandma," Jamey said, his eyes intent on her, "Nurse Evans says that my mommy isn't going to die for a long, long time."

"That's right, honey. La-aw, your mother isn't going to go off and leave her little boy—and neither is your old

grandma, least not just yet." She turned about impatiently to look for the shoes. They were nowhere in sight. "Do you know where his shoes are?" she asked the nurse.

"I was dressing him," said Nurse Evans. "You don't want to get him too excited."

"You let me do the worrying about Jamey," Mrs. Tompkins said, "and you concentrate on finding those shoes. That's how you can help."

Jamey was tugging at her sleeve. She dreaded to look around, knowing that the question was still in his mind. If she could only think of something to say to distract him!

"Grandma, when am I going to die?" Jamey's eyes were unusually bright, but his mouth was grave. At that moment, as she turned back to him, she had the feeling that he was far older than he seemed, older even than herself.

"La-aw, the questions you ask! If you keep asking so many questions, Nurse Evans and I will never have you ready in time."

"I *am* going to die, and I want to know when," Jamey said.

"Honey, that's something none of us know." She turned her head to look at the nurse. "Haven't you found those shoes yet? And you might as well bring the comb while you are at it."

"Why, Grandma?"

"Well, as the man says, if I knew where I was going to die and when, I sure wouldn't be there for it to happen!" Grandma chuckled and made a funny face.

"Why don't you know, Grandma?" Jamey asked.

"It's just one of those things, sweetheart. Now, here's the comb at least; if you will hold still we'll see if we can't make you look like a real young gentleman."

"What's one of those things?"

"That's only a saying. It means that there are some things that not even the wisest man on earth can explain."

"What things?"

Jamey's face was so serious that all she wanted to do was to hold him close to her breast and rock him and tell him that everything was going to be all right. She had known that she could not take that easy way out. Whatever she did, she could not lie to him.

"All kinds of things," she said. "Like why there are stars in the sky. And why the birds fly south in the winter. Or why there have to be wars. Things like that."

"Why?"

Grandma chuckled again. "I'll never get this shoe tied if you don't hold still. You know. I'm going to call you my little why-box."

"What's a why-box?"

"Don't you know what a why-box is?"

"No."

"Do you know, Nurse Evans?"

"I have never heard of a why-box," said Nurse Evans.

"I declare," Mrs. Tompkins said. "I thought everyone knew what a why-box was. Honey, it's big and square and it has three holes in it."

"What are the holes for?" Jamey asked.

"Well, one hole is to put questions in. And the second hole is to get answers out of."

"What kind of questions?"

"All kinds of questions. Big questions and little questions. Long questions and short questions. Hard questions and easy questions. All you have to do is turn the crank and there you are."

"What kind of a crank?"

"The kind you turn, of course. It's right next to the third hole. There! That shoe is tied. Now give me your other foot. I never saw such a fine boy with his shiny black patent-leather shoes."

"Why do you turn the crank?"

"To get answers to questions—that's why you turn the crank. I don't think you listen to what I say."

"I do. Yes, I do."

"Then tell me what the third hole on the why-box is for."

"I don't know."

"What's the first hole for?"

"To put questions in at," Jamey said.

"That's right. Now tell me what the second hole of the why-box is for. And do hold still. La-aw, such a wiggler!"

"To get answers out at," Jamey said.

"That's exactly right. Now if you know that much, why don't you know what the third hole by the crank is for?"

"I don't know because you didn't tell me," Jamey said.

"Don't tell me I didn't tell you that! Why, that third hole's the most important part. And I didn't tell you about the third hole next to the crank?"

"No, you didn't. Honest and truly you didn't," Jamey said earnestly.

"I don't know what come over me then. Why, that hole, that third hole next to the crank is the one that reminds me of a why-box every time I see you."

"Why?"

"*Why*, that's why. You are always asking why. And that third hole on the why-box, the one next to the crank, that's the one that asks why, that's why. There, now you got two shoes, all shined up and ready to walk in!"

"Do you have a why-box, Grandma?"

"La-aw, child, I don't rightly know. I used to have one, I can tell you that; there was a time when just about everybody had a why-box. But I haven't seen mine in so long, I don't know where it is."

Jamey was disappointed. "I wanted to ask the why-box a question," he said.

Mrs. Tompkins picked him up, stood him on his feet

and gave his narrow little shoulders a good squeeze. "Ask your old grandma then," she said. "She is a regular why-box herself." She even winked at Nurse Evans and smiled to herself as she noticed that a muscle in the nurse's face quivered.

"You won't tell me," Jamey said.

"Yes, I will, honey. Grandma always tells you."

He looked up at her doubtfully. "Am I going to die before the best Christmas ever?"

She dropped to her knees and kissed him on both cheeks. "No, you aren't. I can promise you that. Now don't you go worrying about it any more, do you hear? Will you promise?"

"Yes, Grandma," Jamey said tentatively.

Dorothy was standing at the window looking out when Jamey, Nurse Evans and Mrs. Tompkins came into the living-room. Mrs. Tompkins did not actually see her daughter at the window, but she saw the motion of the curtains and the way one drape was pulled a little aside. And Dorothy looked like a person who had just been surprised doing something she did not want to be seen doing. That daughter of hers!

She ran across the room to Jamey, held him high and then close to her. "Jamey!" she cried, and then she started whispering in his ear. After a while, Jamey turned his head away to look at the chrysanthemums.

Dorothy put him down near the flowers. "You can look, but you mustn't touch," she said.

"But I want to touch them!" Jamey said.

"Mother wants to keep them nice for your company, Jamey," Dorothy said. "Don't you want to keep them nice for your company?"

"I want one to have for my own now," Jamey said. He stood close to the vase that was crammed with the heavy blooms, but he was careful not to touch them.

"I'll tell you what we can do," Dorothy said. "After your company is gone, mother will give you one—which-ever one you choose."

She glanced at her watch and then looked across at Mrs. Tompkins. "I can't understand what's keeping them. They were supposed to be here at ten o'clock, and it's a quarter-past already."

"They'll come," Mrs. Tompkins said, "and not one moment sooner for all your bothering. I've been meaning to ask you—where is Bob?"

"Didn't I tell you? Bob went down to the association headquarters; he was supposed to be there at nine o'clock. It was Dan's idea, and I think a good one. He is meeting all the reporters and columnists first and answering any questions they want to ask. Dan will be right there with him to help him."

"Then why do all of them have to come traipsing out here?" her mother asked. "I'd think it would be much more sensible for Bob to handle the whole thing down there so Jamey wouldn't have to be upset."

Jamey was standing as near the chrysanthemums as he could. His head was bent and his small face was partially hidden by the great blossoms. Dorothy kept glancing nervously at him, but she did not reproach him.

"They have to come out here because they will need pictures of Jamey. Dan said it would also be a good thing if they had a chance to see Jamey for themselves. He said last night that—that Jamey's story hadn't hit him until he saw him there in his crib. Those were his very words."

Mrs. Tompkins shook her head at that. "I don't know if it's so good to risk upsetting the child," she said. "Those reporters all talking at once, flash bulbs going off in his face—he could easily be badly frightened."

"Dan has given me his word that it won't be anything like that," Dorothy said. "They are going to take only a

limited number of pictures, and they will stop as soon as Nurse Evans or I sense Jamey is tiring. You might help us by keeping an eye on him."

"You don't have to worry about me," Mrs. Tompkins said. "I'm going to stay as near him as I can."

"But you must remember, Mother, that this is for Jamey. He is the one the photographers and reporters will be interested in, not you or me. Dan says that in a few days Jamey will have captured the heart of the whole nation."

"I'm not looking to have my picture taken," Mrs. Tompkins said. "I just want to be sure that Jamey——"

Her daughter interrupted her. "Mother, Dan Eldridge has so much experience in this sort of thing—I really feel altogether safe in his hands. He explained to me last night just how he was handling it. Bob is seeing the reporters downtown now. He will answer any question they ask. Dan also has had a release typed up giving all the facts, which he will have handed out to them before they ask Bob a single question. But when they come here—and they should be here any minute—it's going to be entirely different."

"How different?"

"Each reporter and columnist may ask Jamey only one question. It will have to be written out in advance and given to Bob and Dan downtown. They will have read these questions over and approved them before anybody even enters the house."

"That may be how it's supposed to work, but we'll see," her mother said.

Jamey had been listening intently. Ever since Nurse Evans had led him to the sofa, he had sat there quietly. "Mommy, are they going to ask me questions?"

"Yes, Jamey. And you are to answer them in your own

words. They will take your picture, too, and you may see it in the newspapers."

"What kind of questions, Mommy?"

"They will want to know about your Christmas, Jamey. What you want for Christmas. Whether you believe in Santa Claus. How you are feeling. And you are to answer them politely and intelligently. Mother will be so proud of her little boy." Dorothy was tapping a cigarette against her wrist and smiling distractedly.

"Why are they coming to take my picture?" Jamey had hardly moved. His grandma could remember a time when he had had so much energy that he could not sit still a minute. He had always been prancing up and down, scampering around, doing somersaults or standing on his head until you wanted to cry out to him to stop. Now he did not even jiggle his foot.

"Because people from all over the country are interested in our little boy. They want to see his picture," Dorothy said.

"Why are they going to ask me questions?" Jamey asked.

Dorothy looked at her mother. It was easy to see that she did not know how to answer him. "You come here and sit on Grandma's lap," Mrs. Tompkins said.

Jamey came slowly across the room. He climbed on to her lap. "Why are they going to ask me all those questions, Grandma?"

"Because people have been hearing about what a big, brave boy you are—that's why."

"But Billy was bigger than me—and braver—and nobody asked him questions."

"I don't know who Billy is," Dorothy said irritably.

"He's the biggest elephant. He took care of me and all the other elephants in the jungle. He stood guard when we went down to the water-hole."

Dorothy laughed. "I asked for an explanation and I got one. I only hope he doesn't answer like that to the Press's questions."

"He can answer any way he wants," his grandmother said.

"Grandma," Jamey asked, pulling at the lobe of her ear to attract her attention - "Grandma, are they coming to ask me questions because I'm going to have Christmas before everybody else? Is that why they are coming to put my picture in the newspaper?"

No one thought to answer him for a moment. Dorothy's unlighted cigarette fell from her fingers. Mrs. Tompkins began to bounce Jamey up and down on her knee, as if he were a much younger child who could be soothed that way. Nurse Evans appeared disconcerted.

"Who told you that?" Dorothy asked.

"Lizbeth," Jamey said. "Lizbeth told me that her teacher said Christmas wasn't for days and days and days yet. She said Halloween came next and then Armistice Day and then——" Here Jamey stopped.

"Where is that child?" his mother asked, looking around her as if her words might cause Jamey's sister to appear.

"I haven't seen her," Mrs. Tompkins said. "Did Bob take her with him?"

"She was here playing a little while ago, making entirely too much racket. I told her to take her dolls up to her own room if she had to make so much noise. She must be upstairs."

"Dorothy, don't you say anything to that child!"

"You bet I'm going to - just let me find her. Oh, this would happen at a time like this." Dorothy walked out into the hall and called up the stairs—"E-liza-beth!" But there was no answer.

The door-bell rang.

Jamey said to his grandma, "Are they?"

Mrs. Tompkins said, "I don't know, Jamey-boy, I just don't know. I'm an old lady and I just don't know."

"Santa Claus is an old friend of mine," said Dan Eldridge, "a very good connection. I think I can get you just about anything you want for Christmas, Jamey. So why don't you tell me about that special present, the one you haven't even told your mother about—and I'll see if I can arrange it."

Dan Eldridge was a younger man than Mrs. Tompkins had expected. He was neatly built and quietly dressed; as he squatted upon his haunches talking with Jamey, his jacket parted gracefully at the back vent. His small, round face was shaved painfully close, his eyes were guarded—she still was not sure of their colour—but his mouth was strong and good. It was a mouth that liked to smile.

"I'd like an elephant," Jamey decided, after regarding his new friend gravely.

Dan sat back upon his heels in amazement. "An elephant! A plush elephant with pink insides to his ears, that's what you want. I know of one that plays King Babar's song on a music-box when you wind him up."

Jamey shook his head. "No, I want a real elephant. One that can trumpet and go down to the water-hole at night to get a drink all by himself."

"And that's exactly what I'll see to it Santa Claus brings you on Christmas Day," Eldridge said, leaping up straight. He held his hands a few inches apart. "An elephant with tusks that long."

Jamey held his own hands as far apart as he was able. "No," he cried, "a real elephant with tusks *that* long!"

Mrs. Tompkins had not expected them to get on so well. When, later, the public-relations man walked away with Dorothy and stood in the hall talking with her, Jamey

took her hand and squeezed it. "Grandma, Dan will be back, won't he? He knows all about elephants."

Within the next half-hour the whole downstairs of the Lewis' small house was filled with men and women, all talking back and forth to each other and creating an orderly disorder. Mrs. Tompkins had feared an uproar, and she was glad to be wrong.

Dan Eldridge was responsible for the discreet and business-like atmosphere, Mrs. Tompkins had to admit. He stood by the door and inspected the Press pass of each man and woman. He spoke quietly and pleasantly to each newcomer, and each listened and did as Dan said. He was so concentrated upon his task as to refuse, momentarily, Bob Lewis admission to his own house because he had no pass—until Dan had glanced up to recognize Jamey's father.

When everyone had arrived, Dan herded the reporters into the dining-room across the hall from the living-room to wait until the photographers had finished setting up their equipment in the other room. He spoke softly and persuasively, explaining what he was doing. "Everybody will be given the same chance to see and talk with Jamey, the same chance as all the others. No pictures will be taken until everyone is in the room." He kept saying these words over and again as he greeted Red and Ella, Timmie and Bennie, and all the rest.

A few protested, saying jokingly, "We've heard that story before!" or "Dan, what about that exclusive you keep promising me?" But the photographers went into the living-room and started quietly and efficiently to set up their tripods and floodlights, their filters and screens. The reporters clotted into small groups in the dining-room.

One oval-faced woman, who kept her shiny black rain-coat on and whose long black bob had the same wet glint as the cloth of the coat, contrived to separate Nurse Evans

from Jamey and to ask her a stream of hurried questions. Bob saw what was happening and that the nurse was flustered; he called it to Dan's attention. Eldridge walked over at once and with a few calm words led the reporter back to the others. He was trying to do his best for Jamey, Mrs. Tompkins decided.

Jamey was at first bewildered by the strong glare of the floodlights; he kept blinking his eyes. Dan suggested that Dorothy sit beside Jamey on the sofa for a few shots at least, until he became used to the new experience.

"We need some pictures of Jamey alone—and some of the mother alone," one of the photographers said.

"This is the way it is going to be done," Dan said firmly.

A small man held a device with a fidgety needle, the whole contraption no bigger than a pocket watch, up against Jamey's cheek. He announced the light reading to the others.

Jamey sat still, watching. At first he seemed interested, then merely obedient. He held tightly to his mother's hand, but his eyes that had begun by darting from one sight to another soon became lack-lustre and unfocused.

To Mrs. Tompkins' relief, Jamey did not appear at all frightened; but when the actual picture-taking began, she realized that he was soon both unpleasantly hot and confused.

At Dan Eldridge's word the reporters came filing into the room. They stood along the walls and in the corners; some of the men sat cross-legged upon the floor in front of Jamey and just out of camera range. Encouraging cries of, "Hello, Jamey-boy" and "We've come to see you, Jamey" made the child glance around him again, this time at one strange face after another—all turned toward him. He smiled uncertainly.

Dan Eldridge entered the cone of hot light near the room's centre where Jamey and his mother sat on the sofa.

He bent down and talked in whispers with Dorothy. Bob stood in the doorway to the hall, his shoulders slumping, an anxious frown creasing his forehead.

Mrs. Tompkins wanted to make them stop it then and there. She knew that anything she might say would only be worse for Jamey; but each time she caught his eyes and saw their dulled blankness, she had to hold herself down to keep from interrupting.

Dan regarded Jamey. "These people have all come to see you, Jamey. They want to take some pictures of you and your mother—and some of them will want to ask you a few questions. Now I want you to listen carefully to what I'm going to say. If at any time you get tired, if you feel too badly and want to take a little rest, I want you to call my name. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Dan," Jamey said hesitantly.

He is too tired right now, Mrs. Tompkins thought. His mother is there beside him; doesn't she realize it?

"O.K., then that's understood," Dan said. "Now, Jamey, first we are going to take some pictures of you. The lights are very hot, aren't they? and very bright. Did you ever see such bright lights before?"

Jamey looked about him, blinking.

"If at any point the lights are too hot for you, I want you to call my name and we'll turn them off for a few minutes. Do you understand?"

Jamey nodded his head.

"There is one other thing I want to tell you, Jamey. Some of the lights you'll see aren't on as yet. They'll go on and off just like that." Dan snapped his fingers. "Quicker than that—quicker than you'd ever think. And those lights—we call them flash lights—are much, much brighter than the ones you see. But they won't hurt you, Jamey. Do you understand that? They won't hurt you at all."

Why doesn't he get on with it? Mrs. Tompkins

thought. He is only putting ideas into Jamey's head, even if he means to be kind.

But Dan Eldridge was through. He smiled again at Dorothy and her son and backed past the crowd of photographers and reporters that had pressed in even closer to the sofa while he had been talking. He joined Bob by the door.

The next few minutes were puzzling enough for his grandmother: she could hardly imagine what kind of an impression they must have on Jamey. Flash bulbs exploded in a crazy pattern of lightning strokes; men danced in, knelt close to the mother and son, peered at them through range finders and poked every size and shape of camera at them. Jamey was asked to hold his hands in prayer and look up, to stand by the mantel and look up, to bend down and look up the chimney, to gaze out of the window.

Dorothy was asked to hold her son, to leave, to come back, to fix the tiny curl behind her left ear. Through it all Jamey did not make a sound, but neither did he smile, except when he was asked. He appeared to accept what was happening as he had so many times endured new treatments that he had not understood.

At last, the photographers were finished and were packing up their equipment. Jamey said something in Dorothy's ear and she led him out of the room, Nurse Evans following. Dan Eldridge walked to the centre of the room again.

"I guess the little boy needs a rest." He gazed around him, displaying his engaging smile. Then he pulled a note-book from his pocket. "I have your questions right here, and I'll hand them back to you right now. Please don't ask any questions we've crossed out. And if you can manage it, I'm sure you'll all agree that it's better to ask your questions one at a time."

The woman in the black raincoat spoke up, at the same

moment snatching a drink from the tray Bob was passing around the room. "There's one thing you haven't cleared up, Eldridge."

"What's that, Connie?"

"How long does Jamey have to live?"

"The medical facts are all down in the press release. I have nothing to add beyond that. But you should remember that we asked you not to ask that type of question once you were in the house. The child doesn't know the true state of his condition." Eldridge took his handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his face.

A lank man was leaning against the television set, and he now jerked his head forward. "The boy isn't in the room. Are the doctors sure he is going to die?"

"The disease is always fatal. Remissions can last from a few weeks to a number of years. A child Jamey's age usually has a remission that lasts a few weeks or a month, only rarely longer."

"And how long has Jamey had this remission?" the reporter asked.

"He is in his third week," Eldridge said tensely.

"Whew! Then it could come in ten days, couldn't it? That doesn't give us much time."

Dorothy came into the living-room, but without Jamey. Her face had gone pale. She beckoned to her mother across the room.

Mrs. Tompkins hurried to where her daughter stood. Dorothy took her arm and pulled her into the back hall. From there Mrs. Tompkins could see that the light was on in the downstairs bathroom, and that Nurse Evans was in there with Jamey.

"What have you been telling my son?" Dorothy wanted to know. Her voice was edgy, but pitched low.

"Nothing that has upset him," Mrs. Tompkins replied. "Those lights are enough to make a grown-up sick."

"I know; I've an awful headache. Simply awful," Dorothy said. "But, Mother, Jamey is so queer. It could be the photographers' lights, but the questions he is asking—I don't know how to answer them."

"What questions?"

"They aren't clear; he's all mixed up. He keeps holding on to me and asking me not to leave him." Dorothy's lips began to tremble. "I had to leave, to come to you—oh Mother, what are we going to do?"

"You go in there and tell your fine friend that he's had all the press conference he's going to have," Mrs. Tompkins said. "That's what I'd do."

"But—how can I? They've gone to all this trouble and expense. Anyway, the worst is over. All Jamey has to do is to answer a few questions. No, Mother, I don't see how we can, although I admit I want to." Dorothy smoothed her temple with the back of her hand. "I've such a headache from the lights."

"You do what you want to do," Mrs. Tompkins said. "I'm going in to Jamey."

Jamey was sitting on the edge of the bath-tub. Nurse Evans was wiping his mouth with a towel. Jamey smiled weakly at his grandma. "I'm all right now," he said.

Mrs. Tompkins walked to the tub and picked up Jamey in her arms. "You don't have to go back in there if you don't want to," she told him. "You can stay right here in Grandma's arms. I'll sing you a song and rock you like I used to do when you were a little baby. Everything will be fine."

"I want to go back, Grandma," Jamey said. "I've got to."

"No, you don't. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, honey."

Nurse Evans was leaning against the tiled wall, a reassuring smile upon her lips. "The child is all right. It was only the excitement and the lights. His temperature is flat and his pulse is quite normal."

"You tell Grandma all about it," Mrs. Tompkins said.

Jamey wriggled free from her arms. He went to the door of the bathroom and looked down the hall at the closed door of the living-room. "Can I go back now?" he asked earnestly.

"You tell Grandma all about it," Mrs. Tompkins said, "and then we'll see."

"Grandma, why were there so many lights in there? Were they the fireworks?"

"La-aw, is that what's bothering you, honey? I do wish I'd never repeated that old saying to you."

"That wasn't really the fireworks in there, was it, Grandma?"

She took his small, moist hand and drew him close to her. "Of course not, Jamey-boy. You heard what the man said, didn't you? Those lights are to take pictures with, that's all. If you had been a little better, they might have taken your picture outside—and then they wouldn't have needed any lights. But inside it was too dark. Now don't you worry about those lights; they are all turned off and you won't have to look at them again."

Jamey turned again to the door. "I've got to go back."

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do," his grandma told him.

"But I want to, Grandma, really I do."

The door to the living-room opened and shut, showing for an instant the mass of people who had crowded into the one place. Dorothy walked down the hall. "Is he ready?" she asked.

"I don't think he should go back," his grandma said.

"Mother, Dan has been talking with the reporters, and

they have agreed to ask Jamey only five questions. It won't take more than a few minutes, Dan said, but those few minutes can make a great deal of difference in the kind of news break we and the association get." Dorothy smoothed her forehead with her fingers, and then she remembered to smile. "That's what Dan said, Mother, honestly. I wouldn't suggest it if I thought it would do Jamey any harm. You know that at first I was against any publicity whatsoever—but now that we've gone as far as we have, we'd better finish it.

"It's your decision, Daughter," Mrs. Tompkins told her. "I can only offer you a grandmother's experience. That child has had enough for today."

Jamey took an experimental step or two down the hall. "I can go back. Grandma said I could go back. I can go back, can't I, Grandma?"

She nodded her head and said that he could. She might be wrong, she knew. Jamey might not be half so tired as she thought; it might be only that she was too tired herself.

She sat down on the edge of the tub for a few minutes, after her daughter and her grandson had left the room; she sat staring at the repetitive pattern of the tile floor until the black-and-white spots swarmed in front of her eyes. She shook her head to clear it, and only then did she walk down the hall and into the living-room.

The reporters stood in a ring around the sofa, pads poised, pencils lifted or scribbling. Dan Eldridge sat upon one arm of the sofa, a leg swinging. Jamey was by himself in the middle of the sofa; but Dorothy stood behind the heavy piece, her hand twisting the fringe.

The room was unusually quiet. Everyone appeared to be listening, as though the silence itself might contain some meaning. Outside the living-room, in the front hall, the photographers were talking among themselves. A man's

voice said, "I'll carry all this stuff down to the car, Harry, if you'll pack all the rest of what's left in those cases."

Dan Eldridge cleared his throat. He smiled and let his eyes rove around the circle of faces. Mrs. Tompkins looked for Bob Lewis and saw that he was still in the same position by the doorway, still frowning.

Dan turned half-about and regarded Jamey. "Are you ready, sonny?"

Jamey looked at him and smiled.

"These people want to ask you some questions. You answer them in your own words. Take your time—and if there's anything you don't want to answer, don't do it. Do you understand?"

"Yes. But I want to answer."

Dan's hand tensed. "That's a boy, Jamey! These people are only here to ask you some questions. You don't have to be frightened."

Several of the reporters were busily taking notes. "I'm not frightened," Jamey said.

Eldridge's face relaxed and he gazed around the circle of reporters once more. He nodded to one of the older men, who had a narrow face and a sensitive mouth, a man whose by-line was famous in New York. "You might as well begin, Henry," Dan said.

The man called Henry stepped forward, crouched at the knees and suddenly grinned. "I've got an easy question for you, Jamey. This question is one that will be fun to answer. Fact is, it's a question I don't have the chance to ask at home. I don't have to ask my boys; they start telling me months ahead of time. But I want to ask you. Will you answer it for me?"

Jamey turned his head quickly to look at the man at his first word. The boy did not smile for a moment or two, and when he did his lips were trembling again. "Yes, I want to answer the questions."

"That's fine. You'll like this one. Jamey, what do you want Santa Claus to bring you for Christmas?"

Jamey's eyes became brilliant instantly. He smiled more widely. He bounced once, then another time, upon the sofa. "An electric train with lots and lots of track and a tunnel," he said. "And I'd like a steam shovel and a trailer truck and some new books. I'd like a pony, too——"

"We have no place to keep a pony, Jamey," his mother said.

"Then I want a real cowboy outfit with two guns and two holsters and a lasso. And I want some space-men and a rocket ship and a fort with real cowboys and Indians and a big gun that shoots real bullets." He paused only to take a breath. "And some books and some puzzles and a yo-yo and—and I guess that's all, but mommy says she could use a new refrigerator in the worst way."

A ripple of amusement flowed through the room. Eldridge stood, holding his hands palms down and shaking his head slightly.

The reporter, who had boys of his own, stepped back into the circle, saying, "That was fine, Jamey. Keep it up, boy."

Dan nodded to a small woman who was standing directly in front of him. She had wispy hair and a plump motherly face. She did not step out of line.

"Jamey, that was an easy question. But anybody can answer easy questions, isn't that right?"

Jamey shook his head.

"Sure they can. Now I have a real hard question that I bet you can't answer. Remember, you don't have to answer it if you don't want to."

"I want to answer all the questions," Jamey said.

"I bet you do. Well, here's my hard question, Jamey. Do you believe in Santa Claus?"

Jamey appeared surprised. He put his finger to his

mouth, but pulled it out quickly and held it to his side. He did not say anything.

Then unexpectedly he smiled and gave another bounce upon the sofa. "Mommy and Daddy are Santa Claus," he said.

This time when the reporters chuckled, Dan did not silence them because Jamey was laughing too. "That was a hard question, but you gave us a wonderful answer," the plump woman told Jamey.

A tall young man wearing horn-rimmed glasses pushed his way forward from the rear ranks. "I want to ask the next question," he said.

Dan shrugged. "O.K., but remember to keep to one of the questions already approved."

The young reporter did not seem pleased, but he pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket, examined it and balled it up in his fist. "I want you to listen carefully to this question, Jamey," he said slowly and a trifle pompously. "What does Christmas mean to you?"

Jamey answered at once. "I like it. Christmas is a nice time when you get lots of presents and eat turkey and candy and have a big tree with lights on it. It's when everybody is happy, and everybody is around you, your mommy and your dad, your sister and your grandma, and they all love you. And I guess I like it because Christmas comes but once a year."

Someone clapped his hands a single time. There was a shuffling and then silence. The young man who had asked the question thanked Jamey and stepped back. Dorothy stroked her son's shoulder. Her face was flushed and her eyes gleamed.

Another young man was seated cross-legged on the floor in front of the fireplace. Dan nodded to this young man and he leaned forward toward the sofa and Jamey, casual and friendly. "I've a real easy question, Jamey," he said

softly but distinctly. "What do you want most for Christmas?"

Jamey swallowed. He looked up at Dorothy, who stroked his shoulder again. Then he glanced at Dan Eldridge. But he did not answer the easy question.

"Could you repeat the question, Ernie?" Dan asked. "Maybe a little louder this time."

Ernie repeated the question: "What do you want most for Christmas?"

Jamey seemed about to cry. He looked straight at Dan Eldridge. "Mommy," he said. "I want mommy."

Dorothy bent over the sofa. She put her arms around him awkwardly. "Mother is right here, Jamey."

Ernie said cautiously, "Could that be his answer to the question?"

Jamey nodded his head emphatically. "I want my mommy to stay with me for ever and ever for Christmas. I don't want them to do anything to her."

Dan checked his watch. "I don't know if we have time for another question. We could stop at that one."

The young woman in the black raincoat ran up to him. "You said five questions. Four is hardly enough." Her eyes flashed and she jerked her head angrily.

"Go ahead, Connie," Dan said, "but let's be quick."

Mrs. Tompkins was surprised at her boldness, when the other reporters had been so nice. But it could be because she was famous: Mrs. Tompkins had read her stories about film stars and stage people in the Sunday magazines. This Connie slipped off her black raincoat and ran to Jamey, kneeling beside him, holding his hand, patting his head. "Honey, Jamey-dear," she said in a heavy, teary voice, "why are you home for Christmas?"

"Because I'm going to die before Christmas really comes," Jamey said.

Chapter 9

BOB LEWIS grasped the broad sheet of plywood firmly, his arms outstretched until their muscles ached. His eye checked to see if the right-hand edge was flush with the guide, if the entire sheet rested level upon the table, sighted down the pencil guide-line of the cut he was about to make. Then his foot tripped the treadle switch; and he began to press with his belly against the board, easing it forward to be severed by the whining, flashing disc of the buzz saw. As the teeth sheared the wood and the sawdust heaped itself up on either side of the cut, the pungent clean smell of the wood comforted his nostrils, and he felt more himself again: that once more it was possible that he could control his world. But the cut was completed in less than a minute, the two strips of plywood ready to be added to the growing pile under the basement stairs—and Bob impulsively yanked out the motor outlet. He had cut enough strips of siding for one night, especially since he did not know when he would be able to work week-ends on the garage again. He might as well go upstairs and wash his hands, and check up on Elizabeth to see whether she was sleeping or lying awake in the dark. If Elizabeth was all right, he could go into the kitchen and look in the refrigerator for a snack.

Ever since that time more than a week ago, the day of Jamey's first press conference, when they had discovered Elizabeth was missing and had hunted all over the house and the neighbourhood for her, Bob had not been easy in his mind about his daughter. He kept remembering the conversation he had had with Miss McIntyre, what she

had said about their running the risk of ruining all of Elizabeth's Christmases for her. He had not agreed at the time, and Dorothy did not now; but he worried about his daughter these days.

He felt a need to talk with somebody about Dorothy and Elizabeth. There were so many unformed thoughts in his mind, and they kept breaking in, interrupting anything he tried to do. The trouble was that he was not used to thinking about people, about his wife and daughter, the way he felt he had to do now. When he was a boy the important things in his life were to be liked by the other fellows, to try to get on the squad in football, to have dates with the most popular girls. He supposed he had been luckier than many who grew up in those depression years: his father's job down at City Hall in the middle-sized Middle Western city was secure, their two-story frame house on a shady street was given its coat of white paint every two years, the summer jobs he held—in a foundry, a box factory, and selling cars in a used-automobile lot—enabled him to save enough money to buy a jalopy for himself the year he started his business administration course at the local street-car college. He did not even feel ashamed that he had not graduated: someone had had to support his mother after his father's death—he did not want her last years to be hard ones. And he had always had a knack for selling, meeting people, talking with them. A salesman had more opportunity to have friends than anybody, that was all selling was, when you got round to thinking about it—making and keeping friends.

The war coming right after his mother's death was, for him at least, another piece of good fortune. No matter how much despair he felt at the time, he realized that he was unavoidably in the first batch of draftees. His experience as a salesman helped, too; he knew how to express

himself the right way in the right quarters. O.C.S. followed, and an assignment in England; by 1944 he was a major with S.H.A.E.F. in London. It had been a good war for him.

Bob started to reach up for the cord that switched off the basement light at the head of the stairs. Ever since he had bought this house in 1947, with the last of his army savings, he had been meaning to rewire that connection: pull cords were dangerous at the heads of stairs. That was one of his faults and he would admit it, the tendency he had to leave well enough alone, to keep riding with the punch. Take his life with Dorothy, for instance. Had he ever really decided that he wanted to marry her? Had she ever at some hour or minute said to herself, I love him and want to live with him and raise his family? Dorothy must have made up her mind, women usually had their eyes and minds open for the main chance; but he could not remember when it had been. And for his part, had there been a decisive moment, an evening when they stopped being lovers and good friends and began to think of themselves as husband and wife?

Bob stood gazing at the electric bulb the way Jamey used to do when he was a few months old; he pulled the cord and continued to hesitate on the top step, rubbing his eyes to help rid them of the blazing after-images. He had met Dorothy at a fraternity dance. She was something of a campus celebrity that week-end—the Eastern girl who had come all the way out to Michigan for a house party. The fraternity brother who had invited her was the son of a wealthy family that summered in Massachusetts and on Long Island instead of going to one of the lakes like everybody in Bob's home town. He had been a rather mysterious person to Bob, an overly good-looking fellow who seemed older than he was, who was not likely to import a girl from New York unless she was really something. And

when Dorothy danced with Bob, she told him within a few minutes that her family did not know she had left home—"They think I'm spending Thursday to Monday with a girl friend in Rye," she said.

He liked her frankness and the way she danced close; and when he took her out to his car later that evening, she gave him her address in a place called Forest Hills, New York, and even her telephone number. "Ring me up whenever you are in town."

He did not see her again until he was stationed at Wilmington and had been in New York every week-end all one summer and fall. Then, one night he rang her up from a telephone booth in the Astor, not expecting her to remember him, and she agreed to meet him at Sardi's in an hour. He saw her every week-end after that until he went to England; each time they had the same room in a mid-town hotel and they fed the same pigeon toast crumbs from their bed every Sunday morning. Their life together began in that room and in and around Times Square, Central Park, Radio City; it was part of the feeling of the time, the bars, the soldiers and sailors, the Victory girls. They had been above all that and, at the same time, a part of it. He did not go home to see her mother until October; and when he met Mrs. Tompkins, he knew that she knew, understood from the way her hand held on to his, from the fact that she called him Bob too frequently and made a show of serving drinks before dinner. If he had ever decided, it had been that night, and he had decided because of Mrs. Tompkins. He did not feel guilty or anything like that. Dorothy was twenty-four and no virgin, and he loved her, if love was the absolute inability to get a woman, one particular woman and the smell of her hair, the way her eyes went vague when she first saw you, the tune she would always begin to hum but could never end, out of your mind. But he knew that they went too far that

night, and that Dorothy and Mrs. Tompkins knew it, too. He realized that he still, for that night and no longer, had a choice. He could stop it there, say good night and I'll see you, and not call her up ever again, not go to the hotel room again, not come back to New York until he sailed—or they could get married. They were married the next week-end at City Hall.

Liz was born while he was in England, and he did not see her until she was nearly three, except for the photographs Dorothy sent to London. He heard Dorothy's voice on the transatlantic telephone every few months; but mostly they kept up their relationship by means of long, tortured letters, which became intense notes when the V-mail restrictions went into effect. It was an unnatural existence, but not much more so than that of anybody he knew at that time: the respectable women with husbands in Libya or Burma, or they did not know where, who smiled at you in the saloon bar from under uniformed caps; the fellows you met in shelters who compulsively recited the chain of imagined evidence against the fidelity of their wives in Lincoln, Nebraska, or Hamilton, Ohio. Bob had known a few girls in England, one of them quite nice; but he stayed married in his mind. And yet he did not think he would be broken up if he found that Dorothy had made another life for herself—she had never been willing to tell him if there had been other men in those years, but he insisted to himself that for Dorothy there must have been others—it would have worked out some way.

If Bob had talked about this to somebody else, as he started to, once or twice, when he had taken a few too many in a bar, the other person would have thought him cold. He was only practical. He had worked it all out for himself during those years of the buzz bombs: Dorothy and he were victims of the modern crisis. If they ever did have a life together, that would be fine. There was no use

trying to plan for it then, when his own life might end in a pile of rubble any moment. And if, when they were together again, it did not work out, well, there were other women, other lives. He saw no point in cutting himself up over a child who was only a muddle of snowsuits and waving arms, of baby carriages and squinting eyes—for at that time he had only seen his daughter's photograph. Or the person might say he lacked imagination? Well, maybe he did at that. If accused, he would not quarrel. But what was the use of imagination in those years? What good would it have done if he had read over each V-letter a hundred times, inferring from the use of a phrase, from what was not confided, another hotel room, another soldier? He saw all around him the empty eyes and the facial tics of the poor slobs who had and who used their imagination. Hell, he was a salesman; he could always make friends, find another woman, promote himself another life.

Bob made himself stop rubbing his eyes. He must have been rubbing them a long time and entirely too hard, because he could feel a deep ache in them. He pushed open the door and stood patiently until the comeback worked and he heard the click that meant it was shut tight. He had got into the habit when Jamey had been crawling around and Dottie and he had been afraid he might tumble head foremost down the steep basement stairs. Well, whatever he had been in those war years, he was a family man now.

When he came back to New York at New Year's, 1946, he had not counted on there being a life for him, a life that he had, at least in part, arranged three and a half years before. He had not even been certain when he would get a hitch across the Atlantic; and then the opportunity came; there was just enough time to make the train; he reached the airport within minutes of departure time. He sent two radiograms from Gander: one to the hotel reserving room

804 and one to Dorothy telling her to meet him there. He half-expected that it would be too late for the reservation or that his wife would not keep the appointment. But it had not been too late and Dorothy had been there—and he had known after that night that she was still his wife.

Did he somewhere, in some cranny of his mind, regret it? Was that what had gone wrong with Dorothy—with Elizabeth? Or was his fault—if it was his fault—his lack of imagination?

Marilyn Clark was sitting in the living-room, a pile of newspapers around her, pasting clippings about Jamey into one of the large scrapbooks Dorothy had bought. The sofa was piled high with unopened packages for Jamey, and Bob knew that these were only the ones that had arrived in the afternoon mail. There was no longer room for their coats and hats in the hall closet: it was stuffed with boxes and parcels that had come pouring in from all over the country. Where was it going to end?

"It's very kind of you to do that," Bob said to the nurse, noticing how the lamplight kindled a small, golden fire in the curls at the nape of her neck.

Marilyn glanced up and laughed self-consciously. "I like doing it," she said, "it's no trouble. I'd only be reading a book while he was sleeping."

"We do appreciate it," Bob said, wondering why he wanted to prolong what was only a polite conversation. "But I mean to say, it isn't your job."

"I know I don't have to do it," Marilyn Clark replied. She was looking directly at him now, and he noticed that her eyes were beautiful. "It's for Jamey, you see. I want to do what I can for him."

"Do you——" Bob began, but caught himself in time. He had been going to ask her if she thought it was right for Jamey to see all those reporters, to have his picture and his story in newspapers and magazines from coast-to-coast,

especially to ask her about that television broadcast next week. But he had realized just in time that he could not ask the nurse; he could not talk about what was bothering him with a near stranger.

Marilyn was still regarding him, her glance open and friendly but not inquisitive.

"Have you, I mean to say," he went on, "heard my daughter stirring upstairs? She hasn't been sleeping well these nights."

"I haven't been up to look," Marilyn Clark replied, "but if Elizabeth is awake, she has been very quiet."

"I think I'll go up anyway," Bob said, moving toward the doorway. And when he reached the stairs, he felt relieved, as if some hazard had been safely passed.

The night-light in Elizabeth's room was a dim blue glow in one corner that created shadows and mysteries. Bob had to wait inside the door for his eyes to become used to the darkness; he had made the mistake before of thinking that Liz was asleep because she lay still. The only way he could tell for certain was to stand there until he could see and then to walk quietly to her bed, reach out and touch Liz's forehead. If she giggled, she was awake. If she stirred and made an inviting noise deep in her throat, his daughter slept.

He glanced around the room. A procession of glass animals marched across the chest of drawers he had made for her, the night-light behind them casting their grotesque shadows upon the farther wall. He saw a camel, some dogs and other creatures that he could not distinguish by their forms, but which he knew to include a giraffe, several deer and a whole stable of horses. A jigsaw puzzle lay spilled on the floor, the toy blackboard was tilted at a crazy angle, and there were several sheets of paper wet with water-colour, as well as a box of paints strewn across

the table. Liz had been awake for a long enough time to make a mess, even if she was asleep now.

Bob felt he was able to see well enough and he walked as softly as he could to her bed. It was not a crib, but a regular single bed, and Elizabeth was proud of the fact that she had not once tumbled out. She was lying motionless, the covers slightly too neatly covering her to her throat. Her hair, the same dusky amber hue as her mother's, wonderful hair such as he had never seen before, was spread upon the pillow. Her lips were parted; she breathed too deeply. She was wide awake.

Bob sat down upon the edge of the bed. He did not take any care to rest lightly, for he knew she was faking. He cleared his throat. The artificially even breathing continued, but one eyelid quivered. Then Liz began to giggle.

"You know you can't fool your old daddy," he said. "Why do you try?"

"I was just going to sleep, Daddy," Liz said. "I do wish you would leave me alone."

"I don't like the idea of my girl lying here awake hours after she had gone to bed," Bob said. "Do you want me to tell you a story?"

"You don't have to, Daddy."

It was the first time she had ever refused a story. Her mother sang her songs, which he knew she liked better; but he had not had luck with that. He could not remember the words of even the most popular tunes, and Liz would giggle when he made up words to fill out the lines, sometimes stopping him and correcting him. She must spend her days with her eyes and ears glued to the television screen.

"Would you like just to talk?" Bob asked.

"Yes."

"What shall we talk about?"

"I don't know."

"Do you want to talk about why you were lying here awake?"

"I was only having a hard time going to sleep, Daddy."

"But why were you having trouble? What was on your mind?"

"I don't know."

"There must have been something bothering you?"

"I don't know, Daddy," Elizabeth said. She was sitting up in bed, her arms locked around her knees, her head on one side so that her hair covered her face, hiding her eyes from him.

"I can't help you, if you won't talk to me about it," Bob said. "If you've done something wrong, I won't scold you."

"I don't think I've done anything wrong," Elizabeth said. "I was only having a hard time going to sleep. Sometimes girls have a hard time going to sleep."

"You don't want me to tell you a story?"

"I like talking with you, Daddy."

Bob felt annoyed. It was so hard trying to talk with children; he had never been good at it. Dorothy seemed to have a trick of knowing what Elizabeth or Jamey wanted to hide from her, of making them admit it.

"Daddy——"

"Yes, Liz."

"It is really a very long time until Christmas, isn't it? Teacher says it is. Teacher says it won't be Thanksgiving until the end of this month. And everybody knows Christmas doesn't come until after Thanksgiving—hunh?"

"That's right."

"But we're going to have our Christmas before Thanksgiving, aren't we, Daddy?"

"Yes, Liz. It's because your brother is so sick."

"But only this year, Daddy. Next year we'll have

Christmas after Thanksgiving just like everybody else, won't we?"

"That's right, Liz."

"Daddy—Jamey's going to die—he's awful sick and he isn't going to get well and he's going to die, isn't he?"

Bob reached out and smoothed the thick, soft hair that covered her eyes and forehead. "I'm afraid so, honey."

He was remembering that afternoon when they had all realized at the same time that none of them had seen Elizabeth since before the reporters and photographers had come to the house. "She was making so much racket with her dolls that I asked her to play upstairs," Dorothy said, when he asked for her. "Go look in her room. It's time she had some lunch."

Bob looked in her room. Elizabeth was not there. He looked all over the second floor and up the stairs to see if the attic door was shut. It was, and he thought it too heavy for Liz to open unassisted, anyway. He went down to the basement and she was not there. He told Dorothy and Mrs. Tompkins that she was not in the house.

"She must have gone out to play, but she never misses lunch. That child has the appetite of a young horse," Dorothy said.

Then Bob went out to the car and drove slowly through all the streets of the neighbourhood. He went to the school and left his car and searched the playground. He went to the candy store. He even went to several neighbours' houses and asked various of her schoolmates' mothers if they had seen his daughter. But he did not find her.

He looked for more than an hour. When he came home Dorothy and Mrs. Tompkins had just completed another tour of the house. "Do you think we ought to call the police?" Dorothy asked.

"She'll turn up," Mrs. Tompkins said. But she did not sound as sure of herself as she usually did.

Bob was reluctant to call the police. He went upstairs to look around once more, thinking that Liz was probably hiding somewhere afraid to come out. He recalled a time when he had been about eight years old and had shut himself in a disused closet. He had stayed there all one afternoon and part of that night while his family had done what he was doing then. He had kept thinking about how sorry his mother and father would be when they finally discovered him dead, starved to death. But he had actually wanted to be found and had only been afraid of what would happen to him when they did find him.

Where would I hide, he asked himself, if I were Elizabeth? He thought again of the unfinished attic. It was exactly the place. Hadn't he warned Liz never to go up there because some of the boards were loose and had nails protruding and she could take a nasty fall and hurt herself badly? It was the kind of warning that made a child do what you did not want her to do. But how could a seven-year-old ever pry open that door made of heavy two-by-fours?

It seemed worth trying, before he returned downstairs and had to tell the women that he had not located his daughter. As soon as he started up the stairs he saw that the door that lay flush with the ceiling was not tightly shut. He raised his hands above his head and pushed it up slowly, not wanting it to flop over suddenly because Liz might be standing behind it.

He opened it at last and stood at the head of the steps, stooping to keep from knocking into the rafters. Elizabeth sat far under the eaves in a small huddle. One of her dolls lay in her lap and she was holding it for dear life. She would not come to him, and he had to go to her, to pick her up—her body hard, taut and cold—and carry her downstairs. Even so, she kept her fists tightly clenched, refusing to open either of them until he made her. In

one she held a blunt pair of scissors and in the other the crushed body of a dead spider.

Had she been worrying about her brother that day? He supposed it would be only natural, since that was the day it had become plain even to Jamey what was happening to him. Bob wished for the thousandth time that he had had the strength to say no when Dorothy had pleaded with him to let his son come home for a Christmas celebration. The child had been happy enough in the hospital, and he would never have realized that he was dying. As it was, the whole situation became more terribly unreal as one day followed another— and as Miss McIntyre had warned, it was affecting his daughter's life.

Elizabeth had been quiet for an uncomfortably long time. Now she raised her head and looked up at her father, her hair falling aside from her face, her eyes gleaming in the dark.

"Daddy, where will Jamey go when he's dead?" she asked.

"He'll go to Heaven, Liz. That's where we all go when we die."

"Is mommy going to die?"

"Some day. All of us have to die some day." As he spoke, he wondered if he really believed it. The words came easily to his lips; they were the only words he knew to say. Somebody had said them to him when he had asked Liz's question. And he had not believed them then, just as she did not believe them now.

When it happened, Elizabeth would sooner or later find it possible to accept her brother's death. But would she ever believe that she would die? Did he?

She was asking another question, had repeated it once already, and he had not listened. "What is it, honey?"

"Is mommy going to die *soon*?"

"Your mother isn't going to die for a long, long time,"

Bob said. "Not for years and years and years. Not until you are grown up and have fallen in love with a young man and have married him and have children of your own. And even then your mother is likely to be around to pester you, and so will your father."

"I know *you* aren't going to die," Elizabeth said. "But Jamey is afraid that Mother is going to die right away." Her voice was anxious. Bob sensed that she was telling him why she had not been able to sleep.

"How do you know what your brother thinks?" Bob asked.

"He told me," Elizabeth said. "He told me that Mother was going to die and that after this world, and the next, she was going to where the fire works. He said they were going to burn her all up, unless he stopped them." Elizabeth spoke rapidly and her voice rose in excitement.

"*Jamey* told you all that? Well, it isn't so. Your mother isn't even sick. And neither is your father. You don't have to worry about that, no matter what your brother says." Bob tried to sound firm.

"But Mother didn't say good night to me tonight," Elizabeth said.

"She had to go to a dinner with Mr. Eldridge, and she had to leave the house before it was your bedtime. I read you a story, didn't I? And Nurse Clark saw to it that you were tucked in." Bob glanced around at the disorder of his daughter's bedroom. "Not that you seem to have stayed tucked in very long."

"When a girl is having a hard time going to sleep she likes to play with her toys a little," Elizabeth said.

"Let me understand you," Bob said. "You are afraid that because your mother wasn't here to say good-night to you, that she will never come back—that she is dead. Is that it?"

"Ye-s."

"And I can promise you that your mother will be home in this house tonight, that she will come upstairs and kiss you, even if you are sleeping and don't wake up—and that tomorrow morning she will dress you and make breakfast for you and do all the other things she usually does." He paused and looked at his daughter, sitting straight in her bed, her eyes wide and bright. He realized that he liked being there in the dark with her. He even liked the smell of her, so different from the smell of her mother. Liz smelled of rice pudding and plasticine.

"Now where did you get this idea that your mother was going to die?" he asked her. "You say from your brother?"

Elizabeth nodded her head. "He heard the doctor talking to Mother in the hospital."

"Did he tell you what he heard the doctor say?"

Elizabeth nodded her head again, this time less confidently. "He said the doctor told mommy that there was something rightorwrong with her and it could take weeks or it could take months— something like that. He said that the doctor told her that it was a person alcision."

Bob laughed, although he did not feel like laughing. "Is that what has been worrying you?"

"Y-es."

"Well, there isn't anything to it. Your brother must have overheard something the doctor told your mother about Jamey himself. He did not understand it, and he repeated it to you the way he misunderstood it. What you told me doesn't make any sense."

Elizabeth was laughing too, forced laughter to show that she really had not been taken in by what Jamey had said either. "He doesn't know what he is talking about does he, Daddy?"

"No, but you must remember that he is a very sick little boy. He must try as hard as he can to understand what is

happening to him, and it can't be easy. So you and I must be as kind as we can be."

"Yes, Daddy." She thought for a moment, shaking her head and its long curly hair from side to side, "Dad—dy, do you know what else Jamey said?"

"No, what else did he say?"

"He said he was going to die so mommy wouldn't have to die and get all burned up. He said that was why he was having the best Christmas never before everybody else, so his mommy wouldn't have to die."

Bob looked at her. She was beautiful and serious. He could not think of what he should do. He took her in his arms and held her tight, held her for a long time until she wanted him to let her go.

"Daddy, a girl has to breathe."

"I'm sorry, honey."

"That's all right, Daddy. Don't you worry. But, Daddy——?"

"Yes, Liz."

"I don't have to die instead of you, do I, Daddy?"

Chapter 10

MARILYN CLARK closed the scrapbook with a bang. If she could only manage to force herself to clip the news stories about Jamey and to paste them into the book without reading them, she would not dislike the job so much. But while she was snipping each new column of newsprint from the page, she could not keep herself from reading it, curious to see what distortions of the facts she knew so well had crept into the account this time. And once again she would end with the same old feeling that the whole thing was horribly wrong, that it should not be allowed to happen, that someone should step in and put a stop to it. She let the heavy book, the second one she had started and that was already nearly full, slip from her knees and fall on to the floor. She sat staring at the piles of packages upon the sofa.

Why did people do it? And what kind of people were they who, reading about the terrible fate of a little boy in a newspaper or magazine, immediately sent off a gift, everything from huge boxes of fruit that a grown-up could not eat in a season to tricycles and games, dolls and puppy dogs—a two-month old cocker spaniel had actually been delivered by the express-man yesterday, and then after a hurried family conference, had been given to a scoutmaster down the street who promised to find it a good home. Did they pity a child none of them had seen, or did they feel some obscure sense of guilt in his tragedy? Or did they say to themselves, there but for the grace of God goes my child, and write out a cheque or mail a package as superstitious persons knock on wood after boasting?

Marilyn did not understand. She did not even know why it was that she had volunteered to keep the scrapbook, when her own opinion was that the Lewises were wrong to let the newspapers make so much of Jamey's illness. She realized that all the publicity meant additional endowments for the national association; they could use the human example of Jamey to encourage wealthy men and corporations to give contributions. She was not even certain in her own mind, as she had once been, that it was wrong for Jamey to know he was going to die. He was such a brave little boy.

She stretched herself in the chair and glared at the two piles of newspapers. The pile that had not been clipped was higher than the pile of discards. She might as well go to it again; what else was there to do?

As she was bending over to pick up the next paper—the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*—she heard Bob Lewis coming down the stairs. Marilyn had forgotten about him; it was a long time since he had gone upstairs to look in at Elizabeth. The child must have been awake: she was probably having all sorts of guilty feelings over her brother's illness. Wouldn't it be hard to be seven and have your brother on you on the front page of every newspaper in the country? And he was even going to do it on television. Poor Jamey and poor Elizabeth!

Bob came into the room and stood looking at the clutter of packages on the sofa. He picked one up, hefted it to see if it would rattle. He put it down.

"You could put some of them on the floor," Marilyn said. She was suddenly sorry for him: he looked so tired.

"I guess I might as well," Bob Lewis said. He dropped a bunch of parcels on to the carpet and cleared a space for himself. He sat down and rested his arm on another teetering pile. "What makes them do it?" he asked.

"What makes people crowd around a street accident?" Marilyn asked in reply. "I've never heard a satisfactory answer to that one either."

"Do you think it's the same thing?"

"How should I know?" Marilyn felt she really ought to smile at him, or he would think she was in a bad temper. Which she was, of course, but it had nothing to do with him. Sometimes she felt almost as sorry for him as she did for Jamey—although that was not really so; she could not have felt sorrier for Jamey if she had tried.

Bob Lewis, though, was a man in the process of taking a beating, or she had never seen one. Marilyn had lived in his house for over three weeks now, had been around every night, which was generally the time when you learned about the skeletons in the cupboard. She had yet to hear them have a real fight. But something was wrong. You could tell from looking at his eyes and the way his mouth line sagged, even though he had a nice firm jaw. She had said to herself more than once that Bob Lewis had a side to this story, too, and it would be well worth hearing.

so "It does seem strange," he was saying. He had picked up another package and was holding it by its string, making the string taut and snapping it with his other finger so that it made a humming sound. "Ten days ago none of these people knew Jamey existed; now they are sending him presents and writing him long letters."

"Some of those letters are really sick," Marilyn said.

Bob ran his hand through his hair. "I opened one today that was from a woman in Chicago who claimed she had recognized in Jamey's picture a grandchild who has been missing since 1950. Only she says her grandchild was a girl. She couldn't even have read the newspaper story."

"Isn't that pathetic?" Marilyn Clark said.

"Did you hear about the woman who came to the house the first of this week?" Bob Lewis asked.

"Was she the one your wife had such a hard time getting rid of?"

"I don't know. There have been more than one." He leaned back and crossed his legs. "Most of them are only curiosity-seekers. But this woman got in because she said she knew a cure."

"A cure?"

"That's what she said. I wouldn't have let her in, but Dorothy did. She didn't even talk connectedly. She had a little cloth bag she held in her hand and wouldn't let Dorothy see. She kept saying that if Dorothy would only let her talk with Jamey for a few minutes she could cure him. Dorothy refused, of course; the boy has been excited enough lately."

"He does seem tense," Marilyn said.

"Do you think he is all right?" Bob asked anxiously. "I mean to say, are there any signs?"

"His temperature stays level and his pulse is all right. Dr. Bray says that he is doing as well as can be expected." He had leaned forward and was regarding her closely, as if he could read more into what she said if he caught every expression of her face. She wanted badly to encourage him. "The lymph nodes appear quite normal."

"Isn't that a good sign?"

"It indicates he still has a full remission. But I'm not a doctor and I don't see the results of the blood tests. And then these new injections—well, frankly, they have been given to so relatively few patients, and hardly any children—"

Bob stood up and paced back and forth. "Am I understanding you right? Or am I misunderstanding you because——?" He did not finish. "What I mean to say is—well, is it possible——?"

She blamed herself for leading him on. It had not been her intention. She had only seen the look in his eyes and

had wanted for a moment to say anything she could that might give him ease.

"Anything is possible," Marilyn said. "But it would be cruel to let you hope."

He sat down and clasped his hands. "But still there is no indication that——?"

"No. But then there wouldn't be until—until there was. I'm not up on the latest therapies. I've never had a patient who had a course of these injections. But I do know that it's wrong to think of a remission as anything but a period during which the disease seems to be asleep. It's still there, and it always returns."

"Always?"

"So far."

"Why do we fight it then?"

"What else would you have us do?"

He kept clasping and unclasping his hands. "I don't know. It doesn't seem right. I wasn't in favour of bringing Jamey home. I thought it would only raise false hopes—and it has. You look at my wife these days; she has almost persuaded herself that it isn't going to happen."

So he had noticed it, too. Marilyn had seen other families react the way Dorothy Lewis seemed to be doing. It was as if human beings could only live so long with a death sentence hanging over someone they loved, and then they had to forget it.

"The way she goes at this publicity business," Bob said dispiritedly. "You would think that every news story anywhere, every mention by a commentator, every new batch of mail, was another proof to her that Jamey could get better, was getting better. I've been trying to talk with her, but she won't listen."

He is saying this now, Marilyn thought, and yet only a moment ago he was trying to make me say that I believed Jamey had a chance. "It may be that your wife feels help-

less," she told him. "It's hard for a mother to stand by and be able to do nothing. This way she is at least doing something. She has said as much to me—by helping the national association she is helping other children, other parents, helping the medical profession to find a means of preventing or curing the disease."

"I know—but is that really why she is doing it—why we are doing it?" He looked at her again and smiled slowly, as though he were ridiculing himself. "I can't expect you to answer that one for me; I can't even answer it for myself. Take this fund-raising dinner tonight. She is actually going to make a speech at that dinner. Do you know Eldridge tried to pressure me into going along, too?"

"It would probably have helped him if you had both been there," Marilyn Clark said.

"I don't want to help him. We've done enough for the association. I want us to be left alone." He stared down at his hands. They were hanging limp.

He was silent. Marilyn tried to think of something to say. She could take a magazine and go into Jamey's room. She had arranged a bulb in there so that it did not shine in his eyes, but the little boy slept so lightly at best that she preferred not to risk disturbing him. She would have to wake him at eleven, anyway, to give him an injection.

"Was Elizabeth awake when you went upstairs?" she thought at last to ask.

He nodded his head. "She hadn't been asleep."

"It must be hard on her, too."

"Do you know what she asked me?"

Marilyn shook her head.

"She wanted to know if her mother was going to die soon," Bob said.

"The poor dear!" Marilyn exclaimed. "Whatever put such an idea into her head?"

"She had been talking with Jamey. It's my reason for

telling you about it." Bob stood and started to walk up and down the room again. "Have you ever heard Jamey say anything about his mother dying? Has he asked any questions that might show he was worrying about Dorothy?"

"No, I don't think so." Marilyn hesitated, wondering how much she should say. There were times when you could be too frank. But he was such a worried man.

"Has he asked you any questions about death?"

"I think he is trying to understand it," Marilyn said. "He noticed that the leaves were all gone from the trees the other day. He wanted to know if they were dead. I said yes. He asked me where they went. I said they blew away. Then he wanted to know where they went when they blew away. You know how a child can keep up a string of questions like that indefinitely?"

"Yes. But what did you say to him? Where did you tell him the leaves were blown?"

"I'm not sure I remember. Let me think. I believe I said they piled up in the gutters and men came and raked them up and carted them away in trucks to be burnt up."

"To be *burnt* up?"

"Yes. I've never thought too much about it, but isn't that what they do with leaves?"

"Yes. Oh, you gave him the right answer. And I don't know how you could have known it was exactly wrong for Jamey."

He slumped down upon the sofa again. Up and down. Then up again and down again. She had not seen him so nervous before.

Bob did not speak for a long while. Then he said, "I think we have to be careful how we answer his questions. He has some idea that his mother is going to die. He thinks—and I don't know how he reasons it—that if he dies, she won't have to die. Worse than that, he confuses

dying, at least his mother's death, with being burnt up in a big fire."

"Oh."

"He has been telling Elizabeth all this. That was why she could not sleep tonight. Dorothy forgot to kiss her before she left. Liz began to worry that she was not coming back, that she was dying, I suppose. She was afraid her mother would be all burnt up."

"The poor child. And she says Jamey told her?"

"Yes."

"Do you think it's because I told him about the leaves?"

"Part of it. You don't ever know where they pick things up."

Marilyn decided she had to risk being frank. "Are you sure, Mr. Lewis, that what you've told me was Jamey's idea?"

"What do you mean?"

"Elizabeth said Jamey told her. But Jamey is her brother. If she is like most older sisters, she has been jealous of Jamey for a long time. He came into a household in which she was the centre of attention and pushed her aside. Such a reaction wouldn't be unusual."

"I know Liz felt that way at first. Dottie and I read a couple of books on child psychology. We were careful."

"But now, don't you see, Jamey is going to die. Your daughter has wished him dead more than once. She feels guilty about Jamey. So when she asks if her mother is going to die and be burnt up, she is really asking you if she herself is going to be punished for wishing Jamey dead—if she's going to die and be burnt up."

Bob Lewis gazed at her. Then he shut his eyes and buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, God!" he said.

Chapter 11

"You didn't have to be in such a hurry about it," Dr. Bray said. He took the cheque Bob had written and folded it once, twice, creasing it methodically with his thumb-nail. Bob disliked the doctor's hands, with their plump wrists and long soft fingers. Each finger had a round, neatly pared nail, and one wore a gold signet ring with a dark-green stone that had an intaglio image incised upon it. Each time Bob had sat in the physician's office he had tried to see the features of the face cut into the stone, he had wanted to seize the hand in order to examine the ring; but he could not have done that, of course, and the doctor had invariably moved his fingers just often enough so that Bob had not been able to make out the lineaments of the carving. He remembered the morning that Dorothy and he had sat in this same office, had listened while Dr. Bray had explained to them with excessive patience that their son could not survive his illness. Bob had known from the way the doctor had greeted them, the feeling he had communicated from the moment they had come through the door, that for them, on this particular occasion, he had all the time to spare that they might need in order to understand completely what he must tell them, that what they had come to hear was most terrible.

"You know, Doctor," Bob said, "if anything I owe you an apology. Although I suppose I shouldn't be saying anything about it."

The doctor had slipped the folded cheque into a drawer of his desk. Why doesn't he put it into his bill-fold, Bob

wondered, is it because he thinks the drawer a more tactful place?

"For what?" Dr. Bray asked. "Surely not for this. Most of my patients, when faced with large, unexpected medical expenses, pay me last. I have come to take it as a matter of course."

"No, not for that. And as I've said I don't know what makes me mention it. It's that——"

"You and your wife are going through a difficult time," Dr. Bray said. "It couldn't be otherwise. I've felt more than once that you needed to talk with me, but I didn't want to suggest it."

"What I want to say—and admit that I'm sorry about it and be done with it—is that all these months I've had a great dislike for you. I knew all along that it wasn't your fault that Jamey has to die. But somehow it seemed as if it was."

"I had to be the one to tell you," Dr. Bray said. "I have sometimes thought that in cases like this we are wrong to let the family know what is in store for them. If you had not known during this time, you could continue to hope. In the end, your grief would be keener, but it might have been kinder if you had not had to anticipate it for so long."

Bob shook his head. "I don't think that's right. And it isn't what I was trying to say. You haven't done a thing wrong, Doctor, not a thing. I know that what I've felt about you has been stupid of me. I guess the only reason I'm talking about it now is because I know you must sometimes have felt my dislike—and I wanted you to know that I couldn't help myself, that it wasn't your fault. But you couldn't have kept from us what was going to happen to Jamey. We had to know. We *are* his parents."

Dr. Bray smoothed his blotter with his paper-cutter. "How does Mrs. Lewis feel about it? I've often thought that she needed someone to talk to even more than you."

"I don't know, Doctor. I guess I don't understand Dorothy these days." Bob's hands were clutching the arms of his chair. He seemed about to spring up. "You remember how she was at first? She wouldn't believe it. She insisted that we take Jamey to other doctors, and you gave us some names."

"I gave you the names of the recognized authorities," Dr. Bray said.

"Well, as you must have known they would, they all agreed with you. But Dorothy wasn't ready to accept the fact even after that. She kept saying to me after we left the hospital each time, 'But he doesn't look that sick, Bob. I've seen Jamey lots sicker when all he had was a cold.'"

"It's typical of the disease, and also of the way family members react to it," Dr. Bray said. "The entire course of the ailment is one of gradual debilitation. Symptoms are generalized. The patient progressively weakens. At the end the patient is comatose. In one sense, isn't that for the best? Jamey will not suffer."

"But it was hard for Dottie to accept," Bob said. "You remember she did not want to allow the blood transfusions. And then she objected to the injections because Jamey fought them so in the beginning." Bob smiled and smoothed the chair arm with his hand. "He has gotten to the point where he knows when it's time for one, and he reminds his mother or the nurse if she is a little late giving it to him."

"If it hadn't been for those injections," Dr. Bray said, "Jamey would not have had his remission."

"Dorothy understands that now, and I believe she even understands that Jamey's present healthiness isn't going to last. At least, she appeared to understand that when we brought him home from the hospital. After I told her what you had said about the national association's offer to publicize our case, she was the one who didn't want to do it."

She said it was our private trouble and that she didn't want to advertise it to the world."

Dr. Bray was listening sympathetically. He sat quietly, giving Bob Lewis his full attention. He was a man who was able to do one thing and only one thing at a time, and this habit of concentration made it easy to confide in him what was not easy to confide.

"I can have a great deal of sympathy with that attitude," he said at last, when he was sure that Bob was waiting for his comment. "At the same time I know how desperately the national association needs funds. Some diseases are more than adequately in the public's mind. Infantile paralysis is a typical example. There is something dramatic about polio, and especially mysterious. It may be that the incidence is highest among children and young adults. For whatever reason, people respond to the fund-raising drives more readily than they do to those for other ailments."

"I explained it to her," Bob said. "But she agreed to it reluctantly. I think if we hadn't needed the association's financial help, Dottie wouldn't have been persuaded in a month of Sundays."

"I was talking with the director of the association only yesterday," Dr. Bray said. "The public's response to Jamey's case has been astonishing. Already the association has received more contributions than they normally collect in a year. And a large corporation is considering endowing a research laboratory. Your son's death may eventually mean our conquest of the disease."

Bob's hand tensed and his face froze. He held back his anger, knowing that the doctor had not meant to hurt him, that no other person could sense that some part of him had not given up on Jamey—and that part would rise in idiotic rage whenever somebody showed complacency about his son's fate. "I ought to be glad about it," he said, "but I don't give a damn."

The doctor was studying him. "Has it occurred to you, Bob, that you and Dorothy have reversed your roles in the last few weeks?"

"You mean that I'm the one who refuses to admit that Jamey is going to die now—and that Dottie now accepts what is happening and is doing what she can about it?"

"I was surprised when you rejected the invitation to speak at the association's dinner last week. And I was even more surprised when Mrs. Lewis came and gave such a simple, wonderfully sincere talk. I felt that night that she had triumphed over herself."

Bob could not sit still any longer. He stood up and began to walk restlessly back and forth, as he did more and more these days. He would light a cigarette and, after a few drags, throw it away. He would go out to the car to drive some place, head down the street, then go around the block, park in front of his house. He would turn on the television set in the living-room, only to snap it off before he had the reception properly adjusted. Most of the time he would sit, not thinking about anything, just sitting. He did not need the doctor to tell him that he was in a bad way.

"I don't want to win a contest with myself," he said. "It isn't easy to talk about; I've never been a guy who kicked things around much in his head. I like to be with people, make friends, tell stories. If something has to be done, I do it—that's all. I don't keep batting it around in my mind until I don't know what's what."

"Yet it is your wife who is doing something about Jamey," Dr. Bray said.

"Is she? Do you really think she is?"

Dr. Bray nodded. "You weren't there to hear the talk she gave at the dinner last week. She was superb."

Bob came back and leaned on the doctor's desk. He

wanted to shout, but he knew he had to keep himself from doing it. "Are you sure it's good for Dottie to be superb about what's happening to Jamey?" he asked.

Dr. Bray thought about it. "I am not certain I know what you are implying," he said carefully.

"And I'll be damned if I'm sure if I can tell you what is bothering me about Dottie. I haven't been talking with anybody about it. I'm not the kind who goes spilling everything. But I think this business about Jamey, the stories in the newspapers and magazines, the talks Dottie gives to the clubs, the interviews over the radio—this television broadcast tonight—I think it's gone too far. I don't think it has to do with Jamey any more. It's a hell of a thing to say about your own wife, but I think Dottie is only doing it for Dottie. She likes to see her picture in the paper. She likes to stand up in front of a bunch of hard-boiled businessmen and make them cry. She likes to be the mother of the 'martyred Jamey'."

Bob looked down at his fist. He had been pounding the doctor's desk. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to lose control of myself."

"It had to come out," Dr. Bray said. "Sit down. Let's think it over."

Bob sat down. But he felt more defiant than ever. He did not understand why. He could see Dr. Bray's point of view, and he could see Dorothy's. He doubted if the doctor would see his own. If you were going to be a doctor, you had to damp your feeling for other people. You could never lose it altogether, but you couldn't risk letting it run you.

Being a doctor was not too different from being a salesman. A good salesman liked to make friends. A good doctor liked to sympathize with people, to feel how they hurt so that he could help them get well. But let a salesman forget that his point in making friends was to sell them goods,

and his goose was cooked. And he guessed that if a doctor let his sympathies run off with his power to reason, if he forgot his purpose was to make other people well, he wasn't much good to himself or the world, either.

From Dr. Bray's point of view, there was nothing more he could do to make Jamey well. He had done all he could. So had Dorothy. So had Bob. But there was something else all of them could do to help other children who contracted the same disease to recover some day. And that was why he was in favour of Dottie's running around giving talks and being interviewed. All the publicity about Dottie and Jamey helped the national association, helped others in the years ahead.

"There isn't any right or wrong about something of this sort," Dr. Bray was saying. "The longer I'm in medicine, the more certain I am of that. A scientist makes a discovery, and a few years later we are all giving a new antibiotic that seems to clear up all kinds of infections. Then, a few years after that, we stop giving this same drug because we've learned that some patients react to it with dangerous side-effects. Would you say, from that, that doctors shouldn't prescribe new treatments for patients until they know exactly what will happen?"

"You know how I feel about that one," Bob said. "When you told me there was a new kind of injection that might help Jamey—or it could kill him quicker, you just didn't know—I said, 'Let's try it; what have we got to lose?' "

"Exactly. And if thousands of other people didn't say the same thing, medical science would never know how new discoveries work out; we would all still be in the Dark Ages."

"But I don't see what any of that has to do with what Dottie has been doing lately?" Bob said.

"Dorothy Lewis is helping the people of our country

discover this disease. Every time someone new hears your wife talk about Jamey and thinks to himself—"It could have happened to my little boy!"—she is helping medical science take another, possibly faltering, step forward."

Bob stood up. He kept getting angrier, even though he knew the doctor meant well. It could be that there was something wrong with him; he knew that a few weeks ago, when the doctor had talked much the same way, he had not disagreed so violently, in fact, he had more or less agreed. But now—well——

"Maybe I'm wrong. I don't see it as you do, though. It's not going to make such a difference in the long run, anyway. And I don't want you to think from anything I've said here this afternoon that I'm not—that both Dottie and I aren't—just as grateful as we can be for all that you've done, are doing and will do for us."

Dr. Bray took his hand. The doctor's grasp was surprisingly firm; Bob guessed those hands were not as soft as they looked.

"You don't have to thank me, Bob," Dr. Bray said. "But there is one other thing I want to tell you." He hesitated, glanced down at his blotter, picked up the paper-cutter, and then dropped it.

"About Jamey?"

"Yes. It could be soon now, you know."

"You means his remission is over?"

"Not yet. But we can't tell when it will be until it happens. The nodes become painful and enlarged. The blood count goes down. It is exactly like the onset of the disease, only much more rapid. The patient is often comatose within forty-eight hours, sometimes almost at once."

"You mean Jamey might not live another couple of days?"

Dr. Bray did not speak for a moment. He is trying to decide how much to tell me, Bob thought. I've been

shouting and pacing his rug, and he is afraid to tell me the truth.

"His blood count was down slightly this morning," the doctor said. "It doesn't necessarily mean anything. At the start of the remission there were a few days when the count fluctuated. But it could mean that his time was limited."

"If he is going to have a Christmas, he had better have it soon—is that what you are telling me?" Bob asked.

"It's as good a way of putting it as any," said Dr. Bray.

"And he had better not go on that television broadcast tonight?"

"I didn't say that. Until the remission ends, so long as he doesn't become over-excited, he can do anything he wants. I'd be very sorry if you did anything that would let the child know that you were wary for him. He understands much more than he seems to, as it is."

Bob stood uncertainly, his hands twisting his hat. "I'm glad you told me."

He left the office. Dr. Bray stood beside his window, gazing aslant through the partially opened venetian blinds. He watched Bob Lewis come out of the building and go across the street to his car. He saw him open the door and climb in.

"I'll watch until he drives away," Dr. Bray said aloud, although he did not realize he had spoken.

But as long as he stood there, Bob did not drive away. Eventually Dr. Bray had to go back to his desk and buzz for the nurse to announce his two-o'clock appointment, a Mrs. Willison and her son Edward, who probably only had a stomach-ache.

Chapter 12

MOMMY had gone downstairs to the basement to put some clothes in the Bendix because if she didn't nobody would have anything clean to wear. Lizbeth was upstairs playing with her dolls, but Mommy had said, "Lizbeth is quite a big girl now, quite the older sister, and if you want anything, Jamey, you just call Lizbeth and she will look after you."

Jamey had not wanted anything, not anything at all. But Mommy had hardly been gone a minute before Lizbeth had come into Jamey's room. She had that funny look on her face. She looked like she was mad at Jamey, although he had not done anything to her. Jamey had never done anything to her, never.

She came and stood beside his crib. She reached inside and took his ball. She started to bounce his ball hard, up and down, up and down, not once missing. He wished he could bounce a ball like Lizbeth.

"I want my ball," he said.

"Shut up!" Lizbeth said. "You're a baby. You don't know how to bounce a ball."

"It's my ball," Jamey said.

"You don't know how to play with it."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't."

"I do, too."

"No, you don't."

Jamey stood up in his crib. He held on to the bars and began to jump up and down. Lizbeth did not even look at him.

"I do, too," Jamey said.

Lizbeth did not answer.

Jamey did not know what to do. He wanted his ball, but Lizbeth kept bouncing it far away from the crib so he could not reach it even if he tried. Then Lizbeth missed the ball. She did not run after it. She let it roll clear to the other side of the room.

"I want my ball," Jamey said.

"Cry baby," Lizbeth said.

"I'm not a cry baby. I want my ball. You took it away from me," Jamey said.

Lizbeth stood looking at him. Her funny, long hair hung down over her eyes. She stuck out her underlip like the clown on television. She stuck out her tongue.

"You don't know anything about Christmas," Lizbeth said.

"Yes, I do," Jamey said. "I know a lot. Grandma's been telling me."

"You don't even know when Christmas is," Lizbeth said.

"I do, too," Jamey said. "It's the birthday of our Lord."

"When's that?"

"It's soon. It's after my television broadcast."

Lizbeth laughed. She laughed too loudly, and she made a funny face when she laughed. Jamey wished she would stop laughing like that.

"That's all you know," Lizbeth said.

"Christmas is *so* soon," Jamey said.

"It's not until December twenty-fifth," Lizbeth said.

"That's not so long."

"It is, too. Teacher said it was. It's days and days and days," Lizbeth said.

"It's after the television broadcast," Jamey said, although he was not so sure of himself.

"That's all you know," Lizbeth said. She pulled herself

up on the bars of the crib until she hung over it, her legs on one side, her arms and face on the other.

"You don't know anything," Lizbeth said. "What about Santa Claus?"

"Daddy and Mommy are Santa Claus," Jamey said. "They take turns. Only we're not supposed to know it."

"You don't know anything," said Elizabeth. "You don't even know you're going to die before Christmas."

"I'm not," said Jamey. His eyes were wet. "I'm not—not before the best Christmas never!"

Lizbeth leaned over the crib. Her legs were up in the air and her head was down. "You're just a baby," she said. "You hear what Grandma says and you say it. You don't know what it means, because you are just a baby."

"I do so know what it means," Jamey cried.

"You want to see me dance?"

"I do so," said Jamey.

"Look at me dance." She dropped down from the crib and walked slowly to the centre of the room. She started to walk around in a circle, her hands up in the air, then diving down. She seemed to be holding something in her hands, but Jamey could not see it. He did not like her dance. It was silly.

Mommy came back into the room before Lizbeth had finished with her dance. She said, "Are you all right, Jamey? Whatever are you two children doing—you look so strange?"

"Jamey don't really know about Christmas, does he?" Lizbeth asked. She had stopped her dance, but she stayed with her hands raised above her head. She seemed about to strike.

"Of course he does, Elizabeth. Why say such a thing?" Dorothy asked. Her back ached from carrying the heavy laundry basket up a flight of stairs. She no sooner got one load done, than another was ready.

Elizabeth began to skip. She skipped out of the room. Dorothy sighed and sat down beside Jamey to read him a story. He was very restless and did not appear to listen. She wondered if Elizabeth had said something to upset him.

Elizabeth went to the hall closet for her hat and coat. She put them on without looking in the mirror and went outside, banging the door. She ran down the street and around the block without looking back. She stepped on all the cracks she could find.

Muriel was skipping rope in front of her house. Muriel was fat, and she had long, greasy pigtails. All she ever did was skip rope. Elizabeth stood and watched her until Muriel did a half-turn and could not see her—and then Elizabeth grabbed the rope away from Muriel. She held it behind her back where Muriel could not reach it.

"You gimme my rope," Muriel said.

"Not until you're nice to me," Elizabeth said.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Say you're sorry."

"But I'm not sorry," Muriel said. "I ain't done nothing to you."

"You are so dumb," Elizabeth said.

Muriel's puffy face went blank. Her thick, babyish lips puckered. "I am not dumb," she said.

"You are so dumb, you're silly dumb. You are so silly dumb, dumb silly—dumb silly, silly dumb—that you don't know how dumb silly you are," Elizabeth chanted.

"I am not dumb," Muriel said.

"You are so dumb silly you don't know anything," Elizabeth said. She hit Muriel with the skipping-rope.

Muriel sniffed, but she stood her ground and did not cry. "Gimme my rope."

"I won't."

"You gimme my rope."

"Say you're sorry."

"I am not sorry. I am not dumb. You gimme my rope."

"You are so dumb. You are so silly dumb you don't know anything," Elizabeth said. She held up the rope as if to hit Muriel with it.

"I know a lot. I know things you don't know," Muriel said.

"You're silly dumb you don't know anything."

"I know things people are saying about you and your brother," Muriel told her. "I know what everybody is saying about you and your brother."

"What?" Elizabeth asked. She had backed away from Muriel, but she still held up the skipping-rope as if to hit her.

"They say your brother is going to die," Muriel said. "They say it's an awful shame. They say it's an awful thing for a little girl—that's you—to have that happen to her brother. They say they're specially sorry for you. My mother says I should be nice to you, even if you aren't always nice to me. But I won't be nice to you, because I hate you—you and that silly brother of yours. I'm glad he's going to die, and I wish you were going to die, too. I hate you, I hate you."

Elizabeth backed away even farther. She stood as straight as she could. She threw the skipping-rope as far as she could, far into the street, where a car could run over and over it.

She turned and ran as fast as she could, not looking where she ran. She ran right into somebody; she did not know who it was. The somebody was big and hard; he picked her up and held her and talked softly to her, but she did not listen. All she wanted to do was to be let go, so she could run and hide and cry and cry somewhere, down,

down in a secret place where nobody could see her, where nobody could ever find her.

But her father would not let her go.

Bob had driven along the familiar street and had parked his car near his house without fully realizing what he was doing. He was aware that there were more automobiles than usual in front of his house and that it was inconvenient to have to park so far from his own drive. He was not actually thinking, though, only returning to each of his preoccupations, half-dreaming he supposed. And he sat a long time after he stopped the car before he looked around him, before he saw his daughter on the sidewalk near-by. He saw her through the windows of the car. She was playing with another child, a fat youngster she did not often play with, a girl whose name he did not know.

He was not able to hear what they were saying because the car windows were shut. It was like watching a silent movie in which he was not much interested. He even sat impassively and watched Liz snatch the girl's skipping-rope out of her hand, all but tripping up the child. He did not do anything even when Liz struck the other child with the skipping-rope, although he thought that it was a dangerous thing for her to do, that rope had wooden handles on the ends, and they could put out the other child's eyes. But he just sat there, as though what he was observing was not happening in the present, but in the past, long, long ago—as though Liz was not his daughter, but himself—and the fat girl was not a girl but the fat bully who had lived down the street and who had always rooked him of everything he had and was proud of, his agates, his shiny new bike lamp, the Boy Scout knife his father had given him, the keen new kite he had made all by himself from plans in *The American Boy*. He had never licked that bully. He had been afraid of him.

And then Bob saw himself back away. He saw his arm uplifted to strike the blow that he had never dared give. A snapping, tingling shock made him jump and startle. What was the matter with him? Liz was in trouble and he just sat there.

He flung open the door of the car and ran toward his daughter. She turned and ran to him, throwing the skipping-rope away in a twisting arc like a snake against the dimming sky. He felt himself again at that—as if he had at that instant awakened. He caught up his child, held and kissed her, loving her more for her abject shame than he had ever thought it possible to love anyone.

He told her he loved her, told her all kinds of foolish things that it was probably wrong to tell a child.

But he had to tell her.

They walked hand in hand up the steps to the porch. The front door stood open. The hall was crowded with newspaper men and photographers all talking at once. He heard a loud voice saying, "Why do you think so many people want to see you on television tonight, Jamey?"

He turned his back on them. He stooped and held up his daughter and whispered in her ear.

"How would you like to go with me to find a Christmas tree?" he asked his lovely Liz.

She sat beside him now, her head upon his shoulder, as he drove toward the outskirts of town. The hatchet he had bought at the hardware store, sheathed in brown paper and tape, lay upon the back seat.

He would have to find a stand of trees as quickly as he could. Dusk was falling rapidly and it would soon be night.

Chapter 13

ELIZABETH liked being all alone in the car with her father driving she did not know where. It was as if she were still running, only she was not running away now, she was running toward something. She liked the feeling of being shut in by the purple dusk, and she liked the pleasant humming of the motor, the roughness of her dad's sleeve, the idea that a surprise was about to happen. She even liked being afraid.

"What are we going to do, dad?" she asked.

"We are going out into the country to cut down a Christmas tree, if I can find one in the dark," her father said.

"Why are we going to cut down a tree?"

"You want a Christmas tree, don't you?"

"Yes. Is that why you bought the hatchet in the store? Is it very, very sharp?" Elizabeth asked.

"It's exceedingly sharp. You must be careful never to play with it. A hatchet can cut you before you know it," her father said.

"It will cut the tree before the tree knows it," Elizabeth said. "Will it hurt the tree?"

"Trees aren't alive the way you and I are alive," Bob said. "Trees don't feel pain. And if we set up our Christmas tree in a holder and give it plenty of water, it will live a long time after we cut it down tonight."

"Will it live until Christmas, dad?" Elizabeth asked. "It's days and days and days—weeks and weeks—months—a long, long time until it's really Christmas, isn't it, dad?"

Bob took his eyes off the road long enough to glance aside at his daughter. She had the same vague look that he so often caught upon her mother's face. He wanted to say something quickly that would make it all right.

"Is that what's been bothering you?" he asked.

"It is a long, long time until it's really Christmas, isn't it, dad?"

"Yes, Liz, it is. Christmas comes on December twenty-fifth and it's only the middle of November. It isn't even time for Thanksgiving yet."

"But if we're careful of our Christmas tree and give it plenty of water it will last to Christmas, won't it, dad?" Elizabeth asked.

"Liz, we are going to have our Christmas early this year," Bob said. "I thought you understood that."

"Jamey is going to have *his* Christmas early," Elizabeth said. "But it won't be really Christmas, will it?"

"We are going to have our Christmas at the same time Jamey *has* his Christmas," Bob said. He could feel the anger rising in himself, and he was ashamed. Why should he expect Liz to understand about Jamey? She was not being selfish; it was only that what she saw happening in her home was too complex and subtle an event for her to grasp.

"No, we aren't," Liz said. "Are we?"

"Liz, let me try to explain it to you. You know what's wrong with Jamey?"

"He's awful sick and he's going to die. He's going to die before it's really Christmas. He's going to have his Christmas early, because he's only a baby and he doesn't know it isn't really going to be Christmas. But *we* are going to have a really Christmas, aren't we?"

"We are going to have our Christmas at the same time as Jamey. It will really be Christmas for all of us. You and I are going to cut down a tree and take it home with us

tonight. You can even help your mother trim the tree if you like. But it will be our Christmas, the only Christmas any of us is going to have this year." Bob had kept on talking, his voice growing louder and his sincerity more intense as he had realized that his daughter did not appear to be listening. He knew that Liz was hardly more than a baby herself, that she could not possibly understand all their reasons for the unseasonable celebration. It was not fair of him to be angry with her. He should be showing her all the love he knew how to give instead of trying to argue with her. Yet he did not want to pull off on to the shoulder of the road until he found a likely stand of trees; it was nearly pitch-dark already, and he did not know how he was ever going to pick a decent tree and cut it down safely with a seven-year-old child holding the flashlight.

"I'm going to have my Christmas when it's really Christmas," Elizabeth said.

Bob jerked the wheel of the car—he had come close to not making that curve. The headlights cut an accidental swath of brilliance through the darkness, and for an instant a cluster of small, bushy pines glittered in front of him. He braked and brought the car to a sudden stop in the gravel and mud next to the road. That bunch of trees had been on the left and maybe three hundred feet to the rear. He should not have too much trouble finding them again if he made a U-turn and drove back slowly to look for them. The spot should be right near the sharp bend in the road, either before or after the curve.

But first he had to try to make Liz understand. He switched off his headlights so they would not dazzle approaching drivers and took his daughter's hands in his own. They felt warm and moist and they trembled slightly. It was important to her, poor kid! Well, he guessed it was important to him too, more so than he wanted to admit.

"Let me tell you something about Christmas," he started to say.

But Liz interrupted him. "I will tell you something. It isn't really Christmas for days and days and days. I know that. But we want Jamey to have the best Christmas ever, don't we? Because he's so sick and is going to die. But our Christmas won't really be the really Christmas, it will be a pretend Christmas, the best Christmas ever."

"Ever," Bob said automatically. "Yes, you are——"

"Never," Elizabeth said shrilly, close to tears. "It won't be a really Christmas, it will be a Christmas ever."

"Oh." Bob sat and gazed at the darkness outside the car. She could not mean all she had just said; he was being grown up and reading things into a child's mistake.

But Elizabeth went on earnestly, explaining to him. "The best Christmas ever—it isn't really Christmas, and when it isn't really Christmas, it's never Christmas. And it will never be Christmas for Jamey because he is so awful sick and is going to die before it's really Christmas. But it will be the best Christmas ever he can ever have." She stopped, took a breath, looked hesitantly at him. "Won't it?" she pleaded.

"Liz, my Liz."

"Won't it, dad?"

"Yes, Liz. Yes. We'll make it the best thing—the best Christmas ever Jamey ever——" He could not talk.

"But it won't be really Christmas?"

"Yes, it will, Liz. Now I want to tell you something. But first, will you answer a question? What made you call it the best Christmas ever?"

"Jamey calls it that."

Bob held her little hands tightly, held on to her as she had held on to him. "He calls it that. Are you sure?"

"Yes, dad."

Bob knew he had to keep on with it. He could not let her know how he felt. He was a grown man, and he could not let his daughter see him cry.

"Now I want to tell you something, Liz," he said. "Christmas isn't just a time of year, it's something that happens here." He put one hand upon her small breast. "Here, in the heart. It can be really Christmas, and if you don't feel it is Christmas there, it won't ever be really Christmas.

"But if you do feel it's Christmas there—here—in our hearts." She had put up her own small hand upon his large breast. "Then—why, then—why, a miracle takes place. It can be Christmas any time, any place." She was gazing at him and her eyes were not vague: they were clear and they saw. "So Jamey's Christmas—*our* Christmas, Jamey's and yours and mother's and mine—will be a really Christmas, because it's in our hearts!"

Elizabeth laughed, and he knew with a shock that he had not heard her laughter in days.

"What a nice, funny place to have Christmas!" she said.

Bob made the U-turn and found the stand of pines without trouble. He put the car into low and pulled away from the highway, parking on a slight rise with his headlights directed at the small trees. He switched off the motor and reached up to the visor for the flashlight. He pressed the button and saw that it worked, handed it to Liz and explained its operation. He got the hatchet from the back seat and stripped off its brown-paper sheath.

He was ready to go, but a curious reluctance kept him sitting in the car. It was almost as if he were afraid to approach the trees. They were not far out of the city and certainly not beyond the suburbs; the pines were undoubtedly on private property. But suppose the owner did

see him chopping down a tree? He could pay for it, couldn't he? And there was no other way of obtaining a tree in advance of the season, without waiting a week or more. It was stupid of him not to have placed an order weeks ago.

No, he could not explain why he put off actually leaving the car and walking into the woods. Liz was becoming restless; she would be hungry and irritable soon. Five minutes and he would have a nice bushy pine lashed to the trunk of the car.

"Dad, why are we sitting here?"

"I was trying to decide which tree to take home with us."

"But can't we get out of the car? I want to see all the trees," Elizabeth said.

He could hardly postpone it any longer. He opened the door on his side and held it while his daughter scrambled out. They walked together into the stand of pines.

Bob took the flashlight from Liz and held it steadily so that its rays cast a broad path of light. They seemed to have walked only a few yards into the wood when the sound of traffic on the road was no longer audible, and in its place they suddenly heard all kinds of small noises, cracklings and sighings, twitterings and scamperings, on their every side.

"I want to go back. I don't like this place," Elizabeth said.

"But you want us to find a nice Christmas tree, don't you?" Bob asked.

"I don't like these trees," Elizabeth said.

Bob switched the flashlight back and forth, scanning the trees all around them. Most were rangy or stunted, some had limbs bent awry. But then, as he swung the cone of light, Bob had a momentary glimpse of beauty. He took Liz's hand firmly and they advanced another yard or two

among the pines. He held the flashlight low and swung its rays upward.

The tree was about seven feet tall. At its base the branches were long and straight, and they grew within a foot of the earth. Two men could not have reached around its bottom foliage by joining hands; he doubted if it would have been possible for three men. But the tree tapered gradually to its top: a spire that pointed like a steeple toward the heavens. Bob grew aware of the scent of the pines, their living presence. He felt he could hear the trees breathe.

“Dad, it’s a wonderful, wonderful tree!”

Bob gave her the flashlight and showed her how to hold it. He stepped forward, stooped and began to cut at the tree’s young trunk.

Chapter 14

ALMOST as soon as the car was rolling along the road back, Liz fell asleep against her father's shoulder, and a great wave of tenderness came over him. He drove precisely and yet by intuition.

When the car reached familiar streets—it seemed to him that the car found its own way, that he had little if anything to do with its direction—he grew aware of a desire to drive through these streets, not to take the usual turnings, never to stop. There had been a full tank of gas that morning and he had money in his pocket. No law prevented him from going on, taking his daughter with him, losing themselves. But the car made the usual turnings and he let it.

As he drove along his own block, his first thought was that the newspapermen were there again. The street was even more crowded than it had been earlier that evening. Then, while looking for a space to park—somebody was always leaving a car in front of Bob's driveway—he saw the long white ambulance and heard the low throb of its idling motor. He threw on his own brakes, slanted the automobile's nose in toward the kerb, and kicked open the door. Elizabeth came awake at once.

"Where are we, Dad?"

"Home. There's some trouble. We have to hurry."

He held the door impatiently while his daughter, drugged with sleep, stumbled out. He took her hand and walked her across the street and up the steps to their house. The front door was still standing open.

As they crossed the threshold, Bob stooped and picked up Elizabeth. She was heavy with sleep and she cried out,

a sound that began as protest and ended as pleasure. He strode past the cluster of men and women who stood talking at the foot of the stairs. One man's eyes were turned upward as if he momentarily expected someone to appear upon the landing and make a pronouncement. Bob walked directly into the living-room.

Dorothy sat on the sofa not looking at anything. Mrs. Tompkins rose from her chair, as Bob came into the room, and walked toward him immediately, shaking her head. He stopped and waited for the older woman to reach him. He did not want to go farther into his own living-room.

"He isn't dead," Mrs. Tompkins said softly, "but he is worse. That television broadcast was too much for him. The doctors and nurses are in there now." She looked at Dorothy. "She needs you. She has been just like that ever since she brought him home. Why weren't you at the broadcast?"

"Were you there?" was all Bob could think to say.

"I didn't have any stomach for it, either," his mother-in-law said. "But I did come over here and watch it on your set."

Bob lowered Elizabeth gently to the floor. "Is Jamey going to——?" she began to ask.

"Take care of her," he said. "Tell her the truth."

"I've not told her anything else," Mrs. Tompkins said.

Bob walked past her. He went to the sofa and sank down beside his wife. She turned her head slightly as though to look at him, but her gaze appeared to be at something beyond. He saw that the small triangles at the ends of her lips quivered. She knew he was home.

"It's Jamey," Dorothy said.

Bob put his hand upon hers. "I know. Your mother told me."

She looked at him beseechingly. "He—he is going to be all right, isn't he?"

"I only know that he is worse, Dottie," Bob said. "That was all your mother had time to say."

"But this isn't—it isn't——?" Dorothy began. "Oh, please tell me!"

Bob smoothed her hand. "You were there, Dottie; I wasn't." He saw Mrs. Tompkins come into the room. "Where's Liz?" he asked. "Shouldn't you be with Liz?"

"I sent her upstairs to take a bath," Mrs. Tompkins said. "She can have her supper later. She is just tucked out; all she really needs is a glass of warm milk."

"You'd better go upstairs and stay with her," Bob said. He had not known Mrs. Tompkins could be so obtuse. She ought to be able to realize that he wanted to be alone with his wife.

Dorothy was looking around, distracted. "Where is Elizabeth?" she asked. "I haven't seen her in a long time, have I? She is such a big girl now."

Bob held his wife's hand firmly. "Dottie—are you listening to me? Please, listen to me, Dottie; you have to get hold of yourself—you just have to!"

Dorothy smiled. "Poor Bob," she said. "You've been so worried. But you don't have to worry any more. I have good news for you. Jamey is going to be all right. I know he is; I'm sure of it." She caught her breath, closed her lips on it—and her face went pale. "Isn't he? Don't look at me that way! Tell me, he is—isn't he?"

"I'm not looking at you in any particular way, Dottie," Bob said. "I want you to get hold of yourself. That is all that's important now. I know it's been hard on you, harder on you than on me. I know it's been terribly hard on you tonight. But, Dottie, you can't let yourself go. Jamey will need you—it's important that you hold on to yourself for Jamey." He was trying to speak unemphatically, quietly, calmly.

Dorothy seemed to be listening to him; at least she

stopped looking around the room, searching. Her eyes grew clearer, and as he watched her closely, fearing for her, her lips formed a gentle smile. "You should have seen him, Bob—why weren't you there? He stood so straight and he looked so sweet in his little white suit. You would have been so proud of him."

Bob sat patiently, waiting for her to go on. My wife is still young, he thought, younger than I had realized. She wants me to protect her, but how can I protect her against this?

"At first they asked him only easy questions," Dorothy began again. "He answered so quickly—oh, you would have been surprised how quickly he answered. Then they played a song, that song they always play at Christmas—I didn't know he had ever heard it, although I guess he must have—and he told them its name without any hesitation. I was so proud of him!"

She leaned forward, her face aglow with remembered excitement. "I didn't have to prompt him. Now you would have thought I might have to, wouldn't you? Dan said it would be all right—after all Jamey is only a little boy, hardly more than a baby—Dan said they expected me to prompt him. But, Bob, it's just too wonderful—I didn't even have to prompt him once. Even when they asked him the words to that old carol, you know the one they say is played too much, though I've never thought so, he didn't hesitate in the slightest. He sang it for them, all the way through!" Dorothy began to rock, clasping herself in her own arms, her face at peace; she began to sing:

"Silent night, holy night.
All is clear, all is bright——"

She broke off. The smile left her mouth slowly, although when it was gone her lips remained parted. A shadow fell upon her eyes. "You can't imagine how quiet it was when

he sang," she said. "Everybody in that big studio—and there were so many people there, all of them come to see our Jamey—every person in that whole place stayed absolutely silent. And the lights were so hot, they were so horribly hot, you've no idea how hot it was up there under those lights. I kept wanting to beg them to turn off some of those lights, but Dan said they had to have them. If it hadn't been for those lights, I think Jamey wouldn't have——"

Dorothy stopped again. She stiffened and shut her eyes, as if seeing once more a sight that frightened her. Bob kept smoothing her hand, trying to think of something he could say to reassure her. He knew she had to talk it out, that to keep it pent up inside her would only make for worse grief later. But it hurt him to see her pain.

She was regarding him again, and he could see that whatever had disturbed her so greatly had passed. "Then someone began to clap. Jamey had finished singing and there had been a silence, a silence that had lasted almost too long. The clapping sounded unbearably loud, and as others joined in the applause, the noise got louder and louder——" She pulled her hand away from him and it flew to her face. "I could hardly stand it. Someone even whistled. It scared Jamey; I saw how scared he was. The lights were so bright and there were so many strange things around him—cameras and microphones that hung way out over your head and moved around and followed you—he was so fascinated by all these new sights that I'm sure he had not realized there was an audience out there. And they kept on clapping, making more and more racket, although Dan stood at the edge of the stage and tried to quiet them. Dorothy shook her head and pressed her hand over her eyes. "I wanted to take him and hold him in my arms—I wanted to take him out of there right then! He was so scared!"

"It probably wouldn't have done any good," Bob said. "Don't blame yourself; you couldn't have helped it."

"I could have stopped it then," Dorothy said, "and I knew I should. But I was so proud of him. Those lights—they were so hot."

"Tell me what happened," Bob said. "Don't worry about it; just tell me what you want."

She nodded her head obediently. Again he had the impression that his wife was much younger than he had ever realized—and more beautiful, too. Seeing her like this, being close to her at a time of crisis, made her different to him. He could not understand how he could have let his picture of her grow so dim and inaccurate. He only wished he could take her in his arms, shut out all her dread in his embrace and, by this one act, make it all right for her again. It seemed to him all but possible that he could.

She had not cried. Any other woman would have cried. He felt it was touching that she could not cry, that something in her would not allow the retreat of tears. He thought of his daughter that evening, how she had struck out at the other girl with the skipping-rope—how she had run blindly away. Did Dorothy want to run away now? Somehow he thought she did. They were alike, these two, his daughter and his wife.

"I could have stopped it," Dorothy repeated. "But he—we— had such a good chance at all that money."

"Money?"

"The prize. It was \$1750 this week. Dan says he won \$600 anyway—for the questions he did answer."

"I didn't know there were any prizes."

"Yes, you did. I told you, I'm sure I told you when we first talked about the television broadcast. You've seen the show right here in your own living-room, anyway. I know you have; I've seen it with you. Bob, you must have known Jamey had a chance at all that money. Why, even

the name of the show—"You Can Take It With You!"—would have told you that."

She might have told him and he had forgotten. Thinking back over the last few weeks, all that had happened was run together in Bob's mind. He was not certain that at any point he could say this had happened in this way; the events raced through his memory like a motion-picture film being rewound at a crazy speed.

"You mean you would have stopped it, if it hadn't been for the money?" he asked.

"Bob, you are making it sound worse than it was," Dorothy said. "No, I didn't think it out. I did consider Jamey's—our—chance at the awards, I'll admit. But that wasn't the reason I didn't tell them to stop."

"Why didn't you?"

"I—I was powerless. It was as if I stood there watching—stood there watching myself watching—and I knew I should do something; only I couldn't move. I was powerless."

Bob looked down at his hands. He knew he was worrying her and that he should not be doing anything to add to her concern. He made himself look up and smile.

"You don't hold it against me? Say you don't hold it against me," Dorothy cried.

"I don't hold it against you," Bob said. "I hold it against myself; I should have been there."

"What could you have done?"

"Probably nothing you didn't do; but I should have been there."

Dorothy was gazing at him, her lips moving. She seemed to be trying to tell him something without words.

"I don't even know all that happened," Bob said.

Dorothy spoke hesitantly. "Jamey got over being scared, Bob. I'm sure he did. I know he was awfully warm

under those lights. He kept looking at them and blinking. After the applause died down, they asked him more questions, harder questions. He answered them more slowly, but every answer was exactly right. He didn't seem a child; he was a little man. They asked him what gifts the Three Wise Men brought to the Infant Jesus, and what a manger was, and why there was a Star in the East. He put his little hand up to his forehead after that last question, and for the first time I thought he didn't know what to answer. But it must have been the heat of those lights. He said something, although I couldn't quite catch it. I think he was complaining about the heat of those lights, the way they hurt his eyes."

"What did he say?"

"I think he said—'the fire'. Or something like that. He didn't say it loudly. And——" She let her head fall into her hands, her amber hair coming undone and flooding toward Bob in obeisance.

Bob put out his hand and smoothed back her hair. She looked up at him slowly, her eyes still dry. "He fell down without a word. No one moved. It was the longest time before I could make myself move. I—I thought it had—it had——"

"That's all right," Bob said. "Really you did all you could."

Dorothy had to go on; she seemed afraid to stop. "They were all as nice as it was humanly possible for people to be," she said. "Dan had an ambulance there before I had time to think of it. A doctor in the audience was on the stage, bending over Jamey, taking his pulse almost immediately. His pulse was so shallow, Bob; you've no idea. I—I thought——"

"What about Dr. Bray?"

"He was there almost as soon as the ambulance. He had been watching the show at his home on his own

television set." Dorothy looked back over her shoulder to the doorway that led to Jamey's room. "He is in there now; he hasn't let Jamey out of his sight."

"Have you had a chance to talk with him?"

"I rode with him and—and Jamey in the ambulance. He said that Jamey's fainting probably meant a relapse, but he said that Jamey had only fainted, nothing else. The excitement. The lights. He said he didn't think there was any cause for worry tonight. He didn't say anything about tomorrow, or the days after that, and I was afraid to ask him. He only said we didn't have to worry tonight." She paused and looked gravely at her husband. "Bob?"

"Yes, Dottie."

"Bob, a relapse—a relapse, he said. Does that mean the end of the remission?"

"I'm not a doctor. But that's what it sounds like to me," Bob said.

"Oh. Why didn't he say that—why did he say a relapse?"

Bob took her in his arms; she was shaking uncontrollably. "I don't know, honey. God, I don't know. We'll have to wait and ask him that. How can I say anything else?"

"What are we going to do?"

Bob took his time in answering her. He could say that she had known and had accepted that this would happen ever since the day she had taken Jamey home from the hospital. But it would be unkind; she knew it as well as he did. He could remind her that she had reacted this same way, and so had he, the day that Dr. Bray had told them Jamey's prognosis. What good would it do to remind her of that past sorrow? He could tell her how only that afternoon he had twisted something Dr. Bray had said only to allow himself to hope for one moment.

But he had to tell her what to do. It was his respon-

sibility—as a man. And then he knew what he could say, knew it was the only right thing to say.

“We can give Jamey a good Christmas,” he said. He could feel her face, dry and hot, against his cheek. And then he felt, suddenly, a hot wetness, her first tear—and with it she stopped trembling, lay quiet in his arms.

He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and lifted up her head. Her eyes were to him blue seas, blue skies, her damp face dear to him. He brought her lips close and kissed her salt mouth. “The worst can’t happen to Jamey as long as we love each other,” he said.

She lay in his arms a long time, content with silence. He grew aware of the reporters in the hall, the sounds of Elizabeth chattering with her grandmother in her bedroom upstairs. Still he held his wife. Then she stirred.

“The tree, Bob—the Christmas tree! We haven’t even thought of buying one!”

“You don’t have to worry about a tree,” he told her. “There’s a Christmas tree, a fine, tall, bushy one—outside in the car.”

Dorothy’s eyes brightened immediately. “Oh, Bob, there isn’t! Is that why—why you weren’t at the broadcast? Is that what you were doing?”

“Liz and I drove out into the country,” Bob said. “We found a tree, a nice one. Liz held the flashlight for me while I cut it down.”

Dorothy reached up and rumbled his hair. “What a sweet thing for you to do. Then we can put it up tonight, can’t we? I’ll go upstairs to the attic as soon as I can and bring down all the boxes of ornaments. I think I have everything we’ll need; I’ve saved them over the years, you know—but, of course, you know! Mother can help. We’ll put it up tonight, as soon as the doctor tells us he is all right, that he is sleeping soundly. And when Jamey wakes up tomorrow morning—but, Bob, the presents!”

"Aren't there all those packages people have been sending us?" he reminded her. "And I have something out in the car, something I bought for him weeks ago—an electric train."

She smiled. "Bob, a train—for Jamey? But he isn't five!"

"Every boy should have a train," Bob said. "It has automatic switches and lots of track—and a real tunnel too."

"Oh, Bob, you're still a little boy yourself."

"I wanted him to have a train," Bob said. "I knew you'd laugh at me, but I wanted my son to have a train."

"I'm not laughing, dear—truly I'm not." She pressed his hand. "You are so much better than I am—so much more a father than I am a mother."

"What makes you say a thing like that?" he asked. "You are a good mother."

She shook her head, suddenly refusing to meet his eyes. "No, I'm not, Bob, and you know it. I'm selfish and vain—all these last weeks I've been thinking of myself, not of Jamey. I've been cruel and egotistical. I hate myself."

He tried to hold her, but she resisted him, moving her head away, her body tense. "I don't know what you mean. You've been having a hard time, but you've done everything you should." He waited, hoping she would speak. But she remained silent, her head on one side, trembling. "Are you talking about the reporters, the publicity, the national association?" he asked.

She gave a slight nod of her head. If he had not been watching her intently, he might not have seen the gesture.

"I don't see how you can reproach yourself for any of that," he said, "not even for the television broadcast to-night. Dottie, you can't allow yourself to feel guilty now. You wouldn't want to spoil Jamey's Christmas, would you?"

"I've already spoiled it, haven't I?"

"No. I don't see how you can say such a thing. Dottie, we both knew that Jamey wouldn't stay better, that sooner or later what happened tonight was inevitable. It's too bad it came at the time it did, and where it did—but I'm as much to blame—more to blame than you—for all the publicity and everything else that Eldridge has arranged."

She shook her head once more.

"Dottie, you have to listen to me. If you feel this way, Jamey is going to sense it. And you wouldn't want him to feel badly about you, would you?"

She remained silent, her head down.

Bob took her shoulders between his hands and shook them. "Dottie, I don't know what has put such an idea into your head—anyway it isn't so. I swear it isn't so. I haven't said anything to make you reproach yourself this way, now have I?"

"It isn't anything you've said. It's how you've acted."

"How have I acted?"

"I've seen; you've tried to hide it, but I've seen. Oh, I've seen how you couldn't stand being around when the reporters came to the house. You were terribly impolite to that magazine writer the other day— and she was such a nice woman, she felt for us so. You hardly spoke to her, and the next thing I knew, you were down in the basement running that screechy saw. We could hardly hear ourselves think. And the way you stayed out of the studio tonight, when I—when Jamey and I needed you most."

"I told you what I was doing," Bob said.

"And it was the nicest thing any father ever did," Dorothy said. She looked at him at last. She had been crying and her face was streaked. "Bob, you were right; I'm trying to tell you so you'll understand how I feel. You were right all along, and I was wrong."

"I don't blame you for not wanting to be near when

strangers came to the house and asked prying questions about Jamey. I'm glad—really I'm glad—that you weren't at the studio tonight. I know how you felt. I know how you hated to see them—to see his own mother—making a side-show of Jamey. And I think you realized the sick thing in me that made me do it, and realizing it, somehow, you don't hate me for it. You just didn't want to see any more of my selfishness than you had to—isn't that so?"

Bob let his hands fall. "I'm not certain I understand all that you are saying," he told her. "I haven't seen you doing anything I disliked—I could never hate you."

He looked at her in silence so that she would have to feel and to accept his sincerity. "I love you, Dorothy. You are my wife and I love you. You must believe it."

"I believe it," she said.

"Then does any of the rest of this matter?"

"I have to live with myself, don't I? I can't go on like this, hating myself, can I?"

"I don't understand why you should hate yourself. You seem to be forgetting that I was the one who insisted on the publicity—for money reasons. And that it was Dr. Bray's idea. How can you blame yourself about the national publicity, about the money, without blaming the doctor and me—without blaming our whole society?"

"I don't blame anyone but myself," Dorothy said. "It wasn't the money, you see. That was only part of it. It was———" She stopped and looked off toward the rear doorway. "I thought I heard Jamey." She listened.

"It's your imagination," Bob said. "I'd have heard it."

"He called my name."

"I'd have heard it if he had."

She continued to listen. But no sound came, except the subdued talking of the reporters in the hall and the noises in the kitchen, where Mrs. Tompkins was giving Elizabeth her dinner.

"If it wasn't the money——" Bob began.

Dorothy turned to him. Her mouth worked before she spoke. "I've always wanted to be somebody," she said. "I used to think I'd be an actress or a dancer. For one whole year, when I was going to high school, I tried to pretend to myself that my mother and father weren't my real mother and father, that they had adopted me when I was a baby—that I was actually the daughter of someone in society, of a member of the British royal family. of a famous man—oh, I imagined such fantastic things. I used to daydream about how there would be a knock on the door and a distinguished gentleman would present himself, tell me he had come to take me back to my own family, to give me back my rightful place in the world. I would see my picture in the newspapers and in the newsreels, and when I went out in the streets, people would turn to stare at me. I wanted so to be someone important."

"Don't you think all of us go through some phase like that?" Bob asked. "It's only part of growing up."

Dorothy would not be reassured. "But I still feel that way," she said. "I still dream of being someone important. I love you and I want always to be your wife, but something in me wants to be alone and untouchable, a great one—majesty."

Bob was thinking of how wild she had seemed that first night he had seen her at the fraternity dance. He was thinking of something he had overheard another girl, probably his own date although he could not remember, saying about Dorothy— "Wouldn't you think she was royalty the way she lets on?"

Dorothy had come close to him, had put her face near his so that the amber silk of her hair brushed his cheek. "Jamey let me be important, Bob. He let me play at being famous. It wasn't for him—it was for me. Don't you see why I hate myself? Don't you hate me?"

Bob did see, slowly, and slowly he felt a coldness begin to grow in him. But he also saw her eyes and her hair, and he made himself take his wife in his arms. He felt her trembling, felt her horror of herself---and the coldness warmed. She grew quiet and lay against him with a soft heaviness that was dear to him.

Chapter 15

"EAT your hamburger and those potatoes and those good carrots—carrots make your hair grow curly—if you want any cookies later," said Mrs. Tompkins. "And drink your milk."

They sat at the kitchen-table, the grandmother and the grandchild. Elizabeth was in her pyjamas and her hair streamed down her back. One leg swung as she pushed her food around her plate with her fork. "Grandma," she said, "Grandma, why are there so many people in the house?"

"You eat your dinner first, and then we can talk," said Mrs. Tompkins.

Elizabeth put a bite of meat into her mouth and chewed it deliberately. "But why, Grandma?"

"Your brother is very sick."

"But when I was very sick once, when I had my tonsils, so many people didn't come to our house all the time, did they?"

"Go ahead and eat your dinner. La-aw, I never saw a girl who could think up so many questions."

"Did they, Grandma?"

"You weren't as sick as Jamey. Those are reporters, honey. They come from the newspapers to ask foolish questions."

"Jamey's going to die, isn't he, Grandma?"

"All of us have to die some day, Elizabeth. Now stop asking questions and eat your hamburger. It's good hamburger, even if I did cook it myself."

"Is hamburger dead, Grandma?"

"What a question!"

"Is it? Hunh, Grandma—is it?"

"Of course, it is. What ever made you ask that?"

"Like Jamey's going to be dead, Grandma?"

"Elizabeth, now see here, miss, you're going to eat the rest of your dinner—and eat it right quick—or I'll—or I don't know what your grandma is going to do. But it won't be nice and you won't like it, I can tell you that, miss. Now eat your good dinner."

"I don't have to if I don't want to. Mommy says I never have to eat anything I don't want to eat. Mommy says the best way in the world to make a girl a poor eater is to force her to eat something she doesn't want to eat. That's what my mommy says."

"Your mother has some queer ideas about how to raise a child," Mrs. Tompkins told Elizabeth. "But don't you forget this, miss, I raised your mother and a whole brood of others—and every last one of them was a good eater. Your grandfather and I saw to that."

"Is grandpa dead—hunh, Grandma?"

"Yes, poor soul. Gone these ten years. And deserving of his rest, if ever there was one." Mrs. Tompkins used the corner of her apron to dab at her eyes.

"Why are you crying, Grandma?"

"Who's crying?"

"You are. I saw you. You are still crying."

"Well and who says I shouldn't. He was a good man, your grandpa."

"Will you cry when Jamey is dead?" Elizabeth asked.

"Will you eat your dinner, miss? Look at those potatoes! I don't think you've so much as swallowed a bit of them. When I was a girl I could eat twice as much as you."

Elizabeth ate furiously for a minute or two. She grabbed her glass of milk in both hands and drank from it

thirstily. Then she stopped eating. "I've had enough. Now may I have some cookies?"

"I suppose so. Though you've hardly touched those good carrots." Mrs. Tompkins went to the kitchen cabinet and took down the cookie jar. She put a number of cookies on a plate and brought them to the table. "Now you just finish that milk," she said. "And don't let me hear another word out of you."

"Why are you so cross, Grandma?" Elizabeth asked.

"Am I cross? I don't mean to be. I'm tired, I suppose, honey. And like your mother and father, I'm worried about your brother."

"I'm not worried about *him*," Elizabeth said. She stuffed two cookies into her mouth and, under her grandmother's gaze, took a sip of milk.

When Mrs. Tompkins said nothing, Elizabeth put down her glass. She swallowed the two cookies and did not take another. "I'm not worried about *him*," she said again.

"I heard you, miss."

"He's going to die. Everybody's going to die. I'm not worried about anybody," Elizabeth said.

"Go right on," Mrs. Tompkins said. "Keep right on talking nonsense. But don't expect me to answer you."

"Everybody's going to die-- hunh, Grandma?"

Mrs. Tompkins passed a hand over her eyes. "It comes to all of us sooner or later, miss. But it's nothing for you to be worrying about."

"Am I going to die, Grandma?"

"Some day. But not for a long, long time. Now you eat your cookies and drink your milk."

"I don't want to," Elizabeth said.

"All through your dinner you kept asking for cookies; now you have them and you don't want to eat them."

"Sometimes a girl isn't very hungry," Elizabeth said.

"Well, then if you're finished, let's go upstairs and hear your prayers and put you to bed."

Elizabeth did not protest. She slipped off the chair obediently and started for the door that led to the back stairs, but half-way across the kitchen, she turned about and ran to her grandmother. She buried her face in her grandmother's apron and began to sob, her small shoulders heaving.

"Now what's wrong? What's the matter with you?" Mrs. Tompkins asked soothingly. "There, there. It'll be all right. Your grandma will carry you upstairs—we're so tired—and sing you a nice song—we're so sleepy. There, there."

"I don't want Jamey to die," Elizabeth said. "I don't want my brother ever to be dead. I'm afraid for him to die, I'm afraid."

"There, there."

Dr. Bray and the two other physicians came into the living-room, but they did not sit down when Bob offered them chairs. The tall, elderly man, who had a fur collar on his greatcoat, glanced at his watch and said something about an important meeting he had had to leave. The middle-aged doctor, who had a plump face and a ready smile, smiled. Dr. Bray came over and stood next to the sofa beside Dorothy; he kept looking back and forth between husband and wife while he spoke.

"We've given Jamey a thorough examination, and we have all come to agreement," Dr. Bray said. He coughed and patted his mouth with his handkerchief. "He doesn't have much time."

Dorothy continued to smile at the doctor. Bob saw no change in her expression, and he wondered if she had understood. "Is he in any pain?" he asked Dr. Bray, as

much to fill in the silence and to give his wife an opportunity to react as for any desire to have his question answered.

"We've given him a sedative." Dr. Bray coughed again. "Nurse Clark has promised to stay on as long—as long as she may be needed. It's about the sedative that I wanted to tell you——"

Bob felt his own legs turn to springs as he understood the implication of the doctor's words. "Do you mean that you've put him to sleep for ——" He could not finish his sentence, could not look at Dorothy.

"It's a calculated risk," Dr. Bray said. "His pulse was strong and even. His temperature showed a slight elevation; it can be expected to continue to rise. The nodes were enlarged. His breathing was more rapid——" He coughed again.

"But none of these details is as significant as the change in his tone, in the muscular tension of his body—you will see it for yourself. The disease is no longer arrested."

"How long does he have?" Bob asked quietly.

"It was what I was coming to," Dr. Bray said. "These matters are never easy to decide. The rate of decline differs with each patient. If he had an uneasy night, he might lapse into a coma quickly, possibly before morning. ——"

Bob had to break in. "That's why you put him to sleep?"

"Y-es. He should have a good night. The progress of the disease should be slowed, if he does sleep well. He should have another day, perhaps another night—you really can't tell—before the onset of coma." The doctor paused once more to cough. Bob had not heard him cough before tonight. If he coughs once more I shall smash in his face, he promised himself.

"It is still possible," Dr. Bray went on, "that Jamey may become comatose before morning. If this were to

happen, he might awaken, or at least stir—there is often a brightening, a burst of energy, before the final lapse of consciousness. If this happens, I have asked Nurse Clark—an entirely competent young woman”—he coughed, Bob’s hands twitched—“to call you.”

Dorothy stood up. “Please tell us the truth, Dr. Bray. Will Jamey have time for Christmas? We have the tree. The ornaments are upstairs; I can get them down and sorted in half an hour. He will wake up tomorrow—he will have a good Christmas, won’t he? Tell me!”

“He has been given a sedative. He should have a quiet night. He has, shall we say, three chances out of four of having a good day tomorrow.” He seemed about to cough, but instead he took both of Dorothy’s hands in his own. “Believe me, Mrs. Lewis, we’ll do everything we can for him.”

“Isn’t there some other treatment you haven’t tried?”

Dr. Bray looked at the other two men. “I asked my colleagues here tonight to make sure of that,” he said. “There is no therapy known to medical science which might possibly be indicated that hasn’t been tried.” He coughed. “It is a mysterious ailment, but it has a comparative virtue, Mrs. Lewis. The patient, until he becomes comatose, is in a most gradual decline. If carefully supervised, Jamey may be allowed to walk, to play—to do anything a normal child might want to do—tomorrow.”

“If he wakes at all,” Dorothy said.

The doctor coughed. He nodded his head.

Dan Ellidge had been upstairs telephoning on the extension, but he pushed his way through the reporters in the hall and came into the living-room just as the doctors were leaving. He saw Bob Lewis smoking a cigarette nervously by the fireplace and Dorothy Lewis standing near the sofa, her hands hanging at her sides, her hair partly

undone, gazing at nothing. He followed the doctors out into the hall, shaking his head to each reporter's question, and motioned for them to come with him into the dining-room. The two older physicians ignored him, but Dr. Bray acceded to his request.

"How is Jamey?" he asked.

Dr. Bray shook his head. He coughed, cleared his throat, coughed again. "We've done everything we can to retard the decline. He has gone to sleep. There's a risk in that, as you know. They sometimes become comatose at once and never regain consciousness." He coughed. "I think I'm catching a cold."

"I've got the same cold," said Dan Eldridge.

Dan went through the kitchen to the back hall and then stood in the doorway to Jamey's room. Nurse Clark saw him and smiled. He went in and walked softly to Jamey's crib.

The boy was asleep, breathing slowly and surely. His cheeks had their usual flush. He was sprawled upon his stomach, a dirty plush animal in his arms.

"He calls it his elephant," said Marilyn Clark. "It doesn't even have eyes, and no recognizable shape -- but he insists it is his elephant. He goes to sleep with it every single night."

"Poor kid."

"Have the parents been told?"

"Just now."

"I don't see why they couldn't have given him his Christmas earlier. He has been looking forward to it so."

"No one expected it to come so soon," said Dan. "He seemed perfectly all right until tonight."

Bob Lewis was waiting for Dan when he returned to the kitchen. "I can't tell you how sorry I am, Mr. Lewis," Dan said, walking toward him, hand extended.

Bob looked at the hand and did not take it. He spat out a fleck of tobacco that had caught upon his lip. He knocked ash from his cigarette. "Call off your dogs, Eldridge."

"But you'll have to give them a statement," Dan said, nodding his head toward the hall, where the reporters waited. "They've been there an hour or more."

"I don't care what you tell them," Bob said. "But I want them out of this house—and you too—in five minutes. Or I'm going to call the police. Do you get me, Eldridge?"

"I'm sorry you are taking it this way, Mr. Lewis. I know you and your wife are under an emotional strain, but——"

Bob stood up. He could feel his face twitch. He could not see Eldridge, but he knew he was walking to him. But when he got there the man was gone.

He sat down on the chair at the kitchen-table. His daughter's half-empty plate was there. There was some milk in the glass. The food looked cold. He wondered if Dorothy had eaten. He was not hungry, but he knew he should eat.

Chapter 16

BOB LEWIS drove his car into his driveway and parked it. He climbed out and stood looking at the bare rafters of his uncompleted garage; now, with winter coming on, it would have to wait until next year. He lighted a cigarette, took a few drags and sent it spinning into the night sky. His watch said nearly one o'clock and he was tired, yet this was not a night to admit to tiredness. He opened the car door and pushed forward the front seat the better to reach the bundles and packages he had piled into the back. He could carry all of these in one trip: none was heavy, they were only cumbersome. He would have to make another trip for what he had put into the trunk.

The last-minute buying had been his job. Dorothy remembered that they had purchased nothing for Elizabeth. "It's her Christmas too, Bob; it simply has to be. There can't be anything left undone which might let Jamey know that it isn't a real Christmas." They sat thinking, trying to remember hints Elizabeth had dropped about what she wanted for Christmas. "A doll carriage," Dorothy said, "with real rubber tyres." "A dressing-table," Mrs. Tompkins added, "with drawers and a mirror." Bob recalled an earnest conversation during which his daughter had described a doll that drank from a bottle and cried genuine tears and wet itself and had hair you could wash and curl and comb "just like a baby's".

"But where can I ever find all these things at this time of night?" Bob asked. The clock on the mantel read five past ten.

"I don't know," Dorothy said. "But you've got to—you simply must."

"Don't drug-stores stock almost anything these days?" Mrs. Tompkins asked, not too helpfully.

Before he left the house, Dorothy thought of Christmas-tree bulbs. "I haven't had time to test the ones I have stored in the attic, dear— but it will be a miracle if there **aren't** a few dead ones. You might as well buy a box and **another** set of wires and sockets, just in case the old ones **have** developed short-circuits." And as he was going out the door, she called out— "Bob, oh Bob!— has he gone, what will we do if he's out of earshot?—no, he's still here— Bob, wrapping-paper, you know the Christmasy kind, we don't have a scrap in the house!"

He went down the street and drove off, heading automatically for Manhattan— because you could find anything there, any time. But he did not know where to begin to look, late at night and six weeks before Christmas. The big department stores would have the doll and the doll carriage and the dressing-table, but they were all closed. Some of the metropolitan drug-stores and novelty shops would probably be stocking wrapping-paper and Christmas-tree bulbs, even this much ahead of the season. But how would you go about getting into a department store late at night?

He went to a novelty shop in Times Square first and found the doll and the Christmas-tree lights. He told the manager of the store about his problem and about Jamey, and the man's stolid face went rubbery. He chewed on his cigar and said, "You wait right there— don't go away——" and disappeared into the rear of the narrow store. Bob saw him telephoning, his jaws working noiselessly at the receiver. Then the manager came back in a few minutes and thrust a piece of paper into Bob's hand.

"You go to this address," the man said, "it's a big

wholesale house, and I've been buying from them for twenty years. It will be all closed up, but you wait there until Jakey comes—he'll be driving a Caddy, a little guy with a wart on his ear—right here—you can't miss him. You tell him you're Jamey's father, the guy Benziger called up about—Jakey won't know unless you tell him; he don't read anything but the *Daily Racing Form*. Anyway, he'll let you in and show you the merchandise—anything you want. You don't have to worry."

"I'll keep track and settle with you afterwards," Bob said.

The manager waved his hand. "Prob'ly won't be here. I was thinking of shutting up when you came in."

"Then I'll take care of you tomorrow," Bob said.

"Forget about it. You can tell the kid one of 'em is from me. I'm glad to be able to do something for Jamey."

Bob drove downtown slowly, thinking about what had happened. When he drew up alongside the big warehouse on a commercial street, and saw no one near, he decided that he was only wasting his time. People were just not that generous with strangers. But he waited for a few minutes, long enough for a cream-coloured convertible to roll by and a small man in a polo coat and a slouch hat to get out and walk over to his car.

"Your name Lewis?" The fellow did have a wart on his ear.

"That's right."

"Mel told me. Jamey's father—hunh? Are you sure there ain't nothing you can do for that kid? I had a sister who went down to Florida to die—all the fancy-spanses docs up here give up on her. That was ten years ago, and she's still alive and kicking. Some kind of water she drinks, so I hear. Maybe you ought to try another climate?"

All the time he was talking, Jakey was unlocking the corrugated-steel door of the warehouse, letting it up with a

thunderous clang, guiding Bob upstairs and into an elevator, down aisles stacked with merchandise, pulling out a carton here, a bin there, revealing a treasure trove of goods. In less than half an hour they filled a cart with dolls and games, a dressing-table, a carriage, several varieties of trucks and building sets, more than Bob had come for or than Jamey and Liz had ever dreamed.

Each time Bob offered to pay, he met the same resistance. "Pay, I don't know what that Mel could be thinking of. Trouble with that guy is all he reads is *Variety*. Jamey's old man don't pay a dime at Jakey's place."

The small man even helped him out to the car and showed him how to stack twice as many boxes and packages into the back seat as he had ever been able to put there before. "You remember what I told you about my sister," was the last thing he heard Jakey saying, standing on the corner, his slouch hat in his hands. "ten years ago the sawbones give her six months. Some kind of water she drinks."

His arms crammed with bundles, every last thing he had been told to buy and more besides, Bob walked up the front steps feeling that it might be a real Christmas after all. He dropped his load on the porch and put his hand to his back. Then he straightened up and kicked open the door. The hall light was on and there was a light on in the living-room. That meant someone was still up—but, of course, they would have to be up with a tree to trim and packages to wrap. He was so tired it was affecting his thinking.

He had erected the tree before he left the house. Shutting his eyes, he could see the tree as he had last seen it: tall and darkly, mysteriously green, smelling of a deep forest, glistening and shining. Would they have all the ornaments on it yet? He hoped not, but even if most were hung, there was always one they left for the last, left for

him to clasp to the topmost branch- the angel with her halo of plastic and her spun-glass wings, the shimmering beauty with her wand of gold.

Bob put the packages into the already overflowing hall closet and threw his topcoat and hat on top of them. A murmur of soft voices came from the living-room. He walked quietly to the doorway and stood looking at the two women and the tree.

He sensed that he had ventured upon some threshold to the past. The tree spread its boughs in the centre of the room; it gleamed with silver foil, and soft blankets of cotton batting were heaped in snowy drifts about its base. Dorothy knelt in the midst of a clutter of opened boxes, her turquoise house-coat a robe that dwarfed her, made her appear a child. Her amber hair was a cloud about her face, and her eyes were bright with joy.

Mrs. Tompkins sat in the small rocking chair that Dorothy had used when both Elizabeth and Jamey were babies. Her legs were crossed at the ankles and she had a faint, listening smile upon her kindly face as she bent down toward Dorothy. Bob remembered that his wife had borrowed the rocker from her mother's house when Liz was born - she had written him about it in one of her V-letters, and he had wondered at the time why she was wasting so much of the precious space on a chair. But now, perhaps, he understood. It was a mother's place, the symbol of a family.

Dorothy was holding up an ornament, an old one, its gilt faded and its once gaudy isinglass dull in comparison with the clusters of plastic and metal that made vivid splashes of colour from their nested beds in the open boxes.

"But, Mother, this one has a candle-holder in it. And, see, when I pull at it, it becomes a tiny lantern. I don't ever remember candles on our trees?" Dorothy was saying.

"Let me look at it," Mrs. Tompkins said. "Law, this is one I must have had from my own mother. We had lots like this, and we would put teentsy candles in them. The isinglass was supposed to make them safe, and I always liked the candles better than the electric lights. But your grandfather insisted on lighting every one of the candles himself— and then, as soon as we had all seen the tree lit up, he would snuff each one of them himself. He was mortally afraid of starting a fire, poor man."

"What was he like, Mother? I don't remember Grandfather," Dorothy said.

"Both your grandfathers died when you were young, but you can remember Grandma Barker, now can't you, Dot?"

"I think I can. She was a tiny woman who wore a crocheted sweater she called a hug-me-tight. She used to live at our house, didn't she? I think she called me the 'young-un' and that she always smelled of cloves."

"That's Grandma Barker to the life. Strange that you should think of her at our house; she was too proud to live with us until those last few months. Then your father went out to the little town in New Jersey where she had herself a one-room cottage and brought her home in the car. You know, I shouldn't be telling you even now, but I just don't know what had gotten into mother. That place, only one room, mind you, was simply crawling with animals. Cats and dogs, rabbits and chickens, all living in the same house with her. She had the kindest heart. She could never pass up a stray, no matter how sorry its condition— but had to take it home with her." Mrs. Tompkins clasped her hands and sighed.

"Didn't you and Dad used to fight about her?"

"What are you remembering now? Well, it isn't so, that's all I can say. Your father was a good man, but he believed in living to himself, and I agreed with him.

Mother was too proud to come with us, so she sold the big house—got next to nothing for it, wouldn't let any of us help her. She lived off that money—how she did it I'll never understand—until those last months. Not that your father and I didn't try our best to get her to come stay with us sooner. But she had pride, Ma did. She had gumption. She used to say she was descended from the Stuarts, though I never believed it. Probably half the country could trace themselves back to some horse thief or other if they half tried."

Dorothy had her hand at her mouth, her lips pressed against her own flesh. "I believed her," she said softly. "I used to think I was a princess."

"You always did have a snotty streak in you. I can think of a time I sent you to bed on bread and water for telling me I wasn't your own mother. And then when you were older, nothing we ever did for you was half good enough. You were for ever running away; once your poor father spent a whole night looking for you all over ten neighbourhoods. And then you come in for breakfast next morning, briars in your hair, just as nice as you please. We never could get you to tell us where you had been."

"I slept under the hedge in our back-yard," Dorothy said fondly. "I told myself it was Sherwood Forest and I was Maid Marian."

"Always with your nose in a book," her mother said.

Dorothy glanced at her mother, her lips in a pout. Bob, from the doorway, again had the strong impression that he was watching the past, that this had all taken place many years, even perhaps many times, before. "You never would tell me what Grandpa Barker was like," she said pleadingly.

"He was a good man."

"That's all you'll ever say."

"I might as well tell you. He was a dreamer. He could

make money, but something in him would not let him keep it. He could make friends, good friends, but he wouldn't let them help him."

"What did he do?"

"All kinds of things. Yancey Barker was what we used to call a jack of all trades. And a master of none is what goes with that saying. He wouldn't settle down. Grandma had that house from her own mother on her wedding day --the big house she sold, not the little one with all the cats and dogs. It was a fine old place, with a nice wide porch to rock on and three real stories with high-ceilinged rooms in them. Sat on a biggish piece of land too, with a brook and a grape arbour and a good barn. A man who put half a mind to it could have made that place his fortune."

"And grandfather---?"

"Yancey was all the time a-running off. Seemed like his feet itched, I don't know. He was always a-going off to make a pile of money and a-coming limping back sooner or later to beg his dinner and a new pair of breeches. I don't know why I'm telling you all this, except that you asked. They loved each other, Grandpa and Grandma Barker, that they did. I suppose that's all that's ever important in this world, or the next."

"Sometimes I think I'm like Grandpa Barker," Dorothy said, her mouth twisted, her amber hair hanging awry.

"Now, what's this? Law, I never heard of such a thing. You two are as different as day and night. You mean the running off when you were a tad? Dot, more children have I known to do that than I can shake a stick at. You outgrew it. You got a good home. You are going to be all right."

Dorothy looked away. She picked up a shard of glass, a parable of glitter. "This one is broken," she said. "What a queer shape; I can't imagine what the whole ornament must have been like. Was it a ball or a star, or it could

have been part of one of those sweet little reindeer?---it could have been anything."

"Lots of them get broken over the years," Mrs. Tompkins said. "And then there's some that lasts and lasts. Not always the prettiest nor the finest - sometimes just the ones you wished you'd never had. But then you get used to them, maybe just from having them around for so long. They get to be a part of you - a part you didn't really want, but, for all that, yours - and you come to accept them."

Dorothy was twisting the odd fragment of glass between her fingers watching it catch the light and send darting messages of brilliance to the darker corners of the room. "I like the broken ones," she said, "more than the rest. They could have been anything."

"But you mightn't have liked them if you'd seen them whole," her mother said. "That's just being young and feeling there's so much to life. I can remember, don't you think I can't. I can think of a time when every day that I woke up it seemed to me I could choose to do all sorts of good and wicked things. I thought I chose my life, that I could make myself happy or unhappy as I wished, that it was up to me."

"Well, it was, wasn't it?" Dorothy asked. She had moved closer to her mother and had turned her back on the tree. Bob found himself afraid that by some inadvertent noise he would break the spell, end this vision of the past that was somehow being lived in the present. "You did choose Father, didn't you?" Dorothy asked, a new urgency in her voice. "You did choose me."

"Who can tell?" Mrs. Tompkins said. "I thought I did, once. In those days it seemed to me that I could lead any number of lives, be all sorts of women. Now, well, Dot, you don't want me to tell you an untruth, now do you? Now I just don't know."

"What do you mean you just don't know? Do you mean I wasn't your child?"

Mrs. Tompkins laughed. "Why, here only a moment ago I was saying you had outgrown all that, and now I see you haven't. Dot, you'd like me to tell you that, wouldn't you? You'd really like to think that you weren't really Dorothy Ann Tompkins, but anybody at all, anyone you might want to be?"

"Don't be silly, Mother." Dorothy pretended outrage. "I simply don't understand what you mean when you say you don't know if you chose your life."

Mrs. Tompkins bent down to smooth her daughter's hair. "I've always liked the colour of your hair, Dot. Never was any like that in my family so far as I know, nor in your father's. But the scientists say that only means there's been a throwback to some long-dead ancestor, that's all."

Dorothy was silent under her mother's hand. Bob saw, at last, what it was in the scene itself—not what they had said, but how they appeared—that had held him so long. Here were mother and daughter before his eyes, merging with the mother and daughter scene he kept in the back of his mind. Here were Mrs. Tompkins and Dorothy mingling with Dorothy and his Liz. No longer two scenes—here was only one. Both present, both past. Now and for ever.

"I'm an old woman," Mrs. Tompkins was saying, "and in my mind is a long story. I tell it to myself whenever I get the chance. I used to tell it all different ways, try on different endings—but never really tell it all. I'd sort of jump from the beginning to the end, seeing myself in different roles as I used to like to see myself in a dozen hats all in the same hour at the milliner's."

"Now I buy the one hat, that old black thing with the bit of blue ribbon. It suits me. I go to the same store and

buy that same hat spring after spring. And I tell myself the same story all the time, too."

"But what about the other hats, the other stories? Didn't you also try all of them at one time or other—and discard them? Wasn't that a choice?" Dorothy asked.

"Dot, I told you I don't know. When you get to be my age you know what you don't know, at least. But you ask me and I have to try to answer you. All I can say is that when I was your age, it seemed to me I could pick and choose the story of my life. It seemed to me I did. I loved your father. I wanted all my children, and they were all my children, even you." Mrs. Tompkins had a twinkle in her eye, and Dorothy laughed—a little too earnestly.

"But now I think back, and there was only one story," Mrs. Tompkins said. "Only one. And I know only part of it. Only one story, and that one began I don't know when—long before my poor life, I'm sure—and perhaps it never will end. I have a few chapters, maybe only a paragraph, sometimes I think a line. And I couldn't have changed a word of it, if I had tried."

"The hats," Dorothy said, "you did wear all the hats, so many different hats. You tried them all, you know you did."

"I suppose I did," her mother told her. "At least they sat upon my head. But were they mine? I think that old black thing I buy every year—with a bit of blue ribbon—was always mine. It suits me. It just took me a long time to find it."

Dorothy gave her mother a long look. Her head fell slowly, her hair flowing in grief. The mother's hand reached out again, once more smoothed the head. And Mrs. Tompkins began to rock. After a while, Dorothy straightened and smiled up at her mother.

Mrs. Tompkins nodded her head once. "But don't you forget, Dot, all I said was that I didn't know."

She put out her hand and took the sliver of shiny ornament from her child's fingers. "I'd better throw this busted piece into the waste-basket before you cut yourself," she said.

Bob turned away from the doorway and went out to the kitchen. He prepared a fresh pot of coffee, making sure to bang some saucepans about to let the women know he was home. Before the coffee had begun to simmer on the stove, the swinging door opened and Dorothy came in. She walked to him and put her arms around him, held on to him hard. But when he tried to kiss her, she turned away her lips.

"You were there," she said. "You heard. How much did you hear?"

"Pretty much, I guess."

"You must hate me," she said. She kept her face turned away.

"I don't hate you. I love you. You don't even hate yourself." He started to stroke her hair, then remembered that it was her mother's gesture and stopped.

"I don't know what I think of myself," Dorothy said. "You must think me ungrateful. I'm not. You are a good man, Bob."

"I married you," he said. "I knew you and loved you and married you."

"Bob, if I could believe that. Then all that has been happening, all the things I've done, wouldn't matter."

He made her turn her head about and he kissed her, but her lips were firm, closed to him.

"Do you remember that hotel room?" Bob asked. "Do you remember our pigeon? How he came back every week-end—how we kept coming back every week-end?"

"I could never forget it."

"You chose that," he said. "I chose that."

Dorothy's eyes were grave. "Do you think Mother's right?"

"She says she doesn't know herself; how could I know?"

"Bob—you'll think it's silly of me—but those hats. I couldn't say it to her; I couldn't find the words just then—but if she hadn't tried all those other hats, would she ever have found the little black one with the bit of blue ribbon that suits her so?"

He smiled. "She did have to try the other hats, didn't she?"

"Of course she did."

"Are you still trying on hats?"

"I don't know, Bob. I don't think so—any more."

"You've found the one that suits you?"

She let him kiss her. Her mouth was as warm and open, as unpractised as a child's. "You suit me, Bob. But do I suit you?"

"I love you. I chose you." They stayed close and then, in a while, they felt together again. "We are still young. That's what is important, Dottie. We have a long time to live—you and I."

Slowly, she moved away from him; but she continued to look into his eyes. Her own gaze was no longer vague. She knew where to look and what she would see.

Bob walked to the stove and stared at the bubbling coffee-pot. "Give it a little more time," Dorothy said. "It has only begun to work."

He turned back to her. "We have as much time as you want."

She took his arm and led him into the back hall, along the hall to Jamey's room. Nurse Clark jumped up as they came in, smiled and left. They stood beside their little boy's crib.

He appeared to be asleep. He had his plush animal under one arm and the lock of hair trembled with each of his steady breaths. "How can anything happen to him?" Dorothy asked in wonder.

"It's up to us to see that nothing but good happens to him tomorrow."

"Yes. Oh, we can—I know that now we can."

But a shadow had come into the room, another breath. They both turned, startled.

Elizabeth stood inside the door. Her hair was damp with perspiration and her face was rosy; but her eyes were wide awake. She held one of Dorothy's stockings high against her breast, but even so the weighted toe dangled near the floor. The stocking was nobbly with the gifts she had stuffed into it.

"Elizabeth, my best nylons!" Dorothy whispered.

"You forgot to hang a stocking for Jamey. Santa Claus won't leave him anything if you don't hang up a stocking." Dorothy ran to her, knelt and held her.

"I didn't want Santa Claus to come and not find a stocking for Jamey," she said.

"But, darling, these are all your precious animals—the ones you love so and that make such a marvellous parade across your dresser top! There are the dogs and the cats, the giraffes and the reindeer, the elephants—why, every single one of them!"

"I was afraid Santa might have come—I was afraid Jamey wouldn't have a good Christmas, the best Christmas ever," Elizabeth said.

Bob picked her up and held her high. "You want to leave this for Jamey—is that it, old Liz?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said, "I do. Sometimes a girl wants to give her brother a present for Christmas."

Chapter 17

ELIZABETH was asleep at last. Dorothy sat up slowly to keep from awakening her daughter by a sudden movement. Bob stood at the foot of the bed. "Do you think she is all right?" he asked.

"She is all right. Bob, she understands."

"I know."

"It's better that way, isn't it?" Dorothy asked.

"I think so."

They left their daughter's bedroom arm in arm. They were at one without knowing it. When they reached the foot of the stairs they stood together for a long moment.

"Bob, I have to talk with you."

"No, you don't." He took his hand and smoothed her hair, held it softly against her forehead.

"I have something to tell you," Dorothy said.

"You don't have to tell me anything," Bob said.

"Yes, I do. But, Bob, where can we talk? I don't want anyone else around."

"We could go for a drive; would you like that?"

"Yes, I think I would. But not far. What if he should wake up, as Dr. Bray said he might?" He felt her tremble as she spoke.

"We could sit in the car. You could tell Miss Clark where we were, and she could call us."

"Yes."

It was cold in the car, but the streets were quiet, and the moon was out. Dorothy did not feel the cold because

Bob was holding her; but each time she tried to speak, her mouth would grow numb and her teeth would chatter.

"You don't have to tell me anything," Bob said again.

"I want to. I must."

"Sometimes it's better not to talk," he said.

"It isn't this time. It's different this time. It isn't as if we had quarrelled and were making up. It's entirely different. Bob——" She took his hand, pressed down upon it. "Bob, I feel I'm entirely *different*."

"You are the same girl I married," Bob said.

"No, I'm not. I'll never be her again. And I'm glad."

Bob looked at her, worried. "What is this all about? What are you trying to say?"

"It isn't easy. Something inside me doesn't want me to say it. I have to fight that something."

"Why fight it? If you don't want to say it, no one is making you."

Dorothy shook her head. "You don't realize—I don't see how it could be, but you really don't realize——"

"What am I supposed to realize? That for a while you were soft on Dan Eldridge?" Although there was the hint of a chuckle in Bob's voice Dorothy could feel his muscles tighten.

"Then you did know?"

"Yes, I knew; or, to be honest, I guessed. I think your mother knew too, but she didn't talk with me." Bob moved his hand up to her shoulders, turned her about until she faced him and had to look into his eyes. "Dorothy, don't be foolish. Don't you think I understand how you felt, how important it was for you to reach out and find someone?"

"There was you."

"Was I there? Was I, really?"

"I don't know what you mean," Dorothy said.

"You must know. I've been married to you a long time, living in the same house with you-----"

"Nine years."

"A long time. And do you think I haven't known that there was a part of you I could never touch? Don't you think I realized long ago that neither your mother nor myself could help you about Jamey? You had to find somebody else."

"I only kissed Dan once. And I kissed him; he didn't kiss me," Dorothy said.

"Then what are you worrying about?"

"I wanted to do so much more," she said. "I must have been crazy, but I wanted to be in love with him. I would have liked to go away with him; I used to lie awake at nights and think about going away with him, living in a different house, leading a different life."

"Do you still do that?"

"No." She glanced away, "I don't think I ever will again."

"Why not?"

"This is my life. You. Elizabeth. This car. This house. I don't want anything else."

"You've found your little black hat with the blue ribbon."

"I've always had it and I didn't know it. Bob, I have to tell you; it's telling myself, don't you see? Long before I met you, even when I was a girl, I'd never admit to myself that I was only Dorothy Ann Tompkins who lived on a certain street and had a certain number of dresses and went to a certain school. Life was going to change for me soon; it simply had to change. I was always trying to make it change. I don't think I lived one moment in the present; I was always thinking ahead to what it was going to be like after the big change."

"Didn't you know what you were doing when you met me?" Bob asked.

"I thought I was changing my life, but I never thought—not even after we were married—that our life was permanent. I had Liz to look after and you weren't there; you were only a string of numbers. There were times I'd try to see your face and I couldn't do it. So I kept thinking the change would come, that the life I was living was only temporary."

"But then I came home," Bob said. "Don't think I'm blaming you; I felt much the same way when I was in the Army. Liz wasn't real to me until I held her in my arms." He was silent for a long time, and she listened for each of his breaths, as if somehow she could tell from the way he breathed what he would say next. Yet when he spoke, she was not prepared. "Wasn't it different when I came home?"

"It was at first. It was wonderful at first. It still is wonderful. I'm only beginning to find out how wonderful it really is—that's part of what I'm trying to tell you," Dorothy said.

"But there were years when it wasn't good?" Bob asked.

"After a time, I don't know just when, I started to look forward to a change again. I took care of the children, I loved them and I loved you; but I had a deep conviction that it couldn't always be like it was then, that there had to be more to my life. And then——"

"Jamey?"

"It was last summer. We had come back from the hospital. Dr. Bray had just told us the news. I don't know how you felt——"

"I felt I could not believe it. I felt angry at the doctor; I was going to have other doctors in and clear up the mistake," Bob said.

"I felt all of that," Dorothy said. "But I felt something else that I suppose I'm ashamed of—I felt thrilled."

"Thrilled?"

"Does it seem strange to you? I don't know if I can explain it. I felt as if at last something important was happening to me, that the change had come and I was going to be somebody. I got over it quickly enough, and afterwards I thought I had been mad. So when you first told me about the arrangements you had made with the association, I could be honestly angry with you."

"I remember you were very much against the publicity—at the beginning," Bob said. "What made you change—Dan?"

"He had something to do with it, but not all. But, you see, I was angry with you because I thought you felt the way I had felt. I thought you were going to let the association tell the reporters about Jamey to get your—our—pictures in the papers."

"I needed the money. If I'd had the money, I'd have told Eldridge to go to hell," Bob said.

"It was wrong of me, but I did blame you for my own selfishness," Dorothy said. "Later, there was Dan. He made me feel I was doing something for the good of humanity. I really believed I was, when I made those speeches. Every time I talked to a reporter I thought I was helping other children all over the country. And I was; I did raise a lot of money. But I was really doing it mostly for myself; I realized that tonight—I——"

"What happened tonight? You mean Dr. Bray telling us that Jamey didn't have much longer——?"

Dorothy took the handkerchief from Bob's pocket and blew her nose. "I guess I didn't really believe it was going to happen. And then, all at once, I had to believe it. And, do you know, I had to face up to something else. It wasn't happening to me, it was happening to Jamey. He under-

stood it. He knows what his life is and that it is ending. But, Bob, not until then, not until I knew that if Jamey was ever going to have a Christmas it had to be *tomorrow*, not until that very moment did I know what it is to live."

"And what is it?" Bob asked.

"It's being one person, Bob, all one person. It's being what you are and not pretending to be anything else—the way Jamey is Jamey. And it's something else. It's knowing, really knowing, that some day you are going to die. It's knowing that and not being afraid."

She held the handkerchief to her eyes and sniffled a few times. "I thought I was going to cry," she said, "but I guess I'm not. I'm all cried out."

Her head was on his shoulder; they were comfortable together, all one person, warm and safe. "Bob?" she asked gently.

"Yes."

"You said there was a part of me you could never touch."

"I know."

"Is that still true?"

"No."

"I'm glad."

They were silent. He knew she was waiting for him to speak, that now he had to tell her. He could not avoid it, but it was hard to begin. He understood what she had meant when she had said that she had to fight something inside her to tell him about herself. It was his turn to fight himself, the part of himself he was afraid to lose.

"You don't have to tell me," she said quietly. "It won't matter."

"Yes, it will," he said. "Dorothy, I'm not much good at talking about myself; I guess you know that. I like to be with people, to talk up to people, to persuade other

people to buy something, to see things my way. I'm a salesman. I——"

"I like you just the way you are," she said.

"I know—and until a few days ago I liked myself. But what has been happening to Jamey has made me think about myself. As I say, I'm not good at thinking about myself: I had to learn to do it from scratch. There's a part of me that doesn't want me to think."

"It's the part of you I could never touch," Dorothy said.

Bob laughed self-consciously. "I'd never thought of it that way, but you're right. Dottie, believe me, I didn't know anything about that part of me until just the other day—and I still don't know as much as I ought. And what I know I don't like to talk about."

She pressed her lips against his own. "Please—don't."

"I must. I was sitting in the car this afternoon. I saw Liz go up to another child and start a fight. Dottie, I didn't ever do that when I was a boy; I stayed away from fights. I made friends, instead. Only I wasn't ever really friends with any of them; I was only persuading them not to fight with me. I didn't want to know what they were like, or what I was like; I just wanted everything to seem to be all right.

"And then I saw Liz pick the fight I'd never dared to pick. I knew she was unhappy, that she was scared—that I was scared. And I could not help her."

"You did all you could do," Dorothy said. "You took her with you when you went to find the Christmas tree. It was exactly the right thing to do."

"Yes." He stared through the windshield into the night. "Yes, it's funny about that tree, though. You know, I was afraid, and excited, too, when I cut it down. It was as if I was making it real, that until I put my axe into that tree, all that had been happening to Jamey—to Liz and us—was something we dreamed about. But when the

tree fell I had made it real; from that point on it had to happen."

He could feel her tremble. "No, you didn't make it happen," she said. "It would have happened anyway. You only accepted that it had to happen. I didn't know that you knew it, but you knew that Jamey's Christmas had to be tomorrow."

"There's a lot I don't know," Bob said, "and some I do. But I'm going to know more. This is my life—you, Liz, Jamey—I'm going to be here all the time. I'm going to live it all up, every bit of it." He nodded his head, as if someone else had spoken, not himself, and he agreed.

They looked in on Jamey before they went upstairs. Marilyn Clark was reading, and Jamey lay quietly, breathing regularly. His cheeks were slightly flushed and he held the shapeless cloth animal tightly with both hands.

Dorothy was smiling to herself. "What are you thinking?" Bob asked.

"I was remembering the first time I ever saw him. It was in the hospital. They had given me ether and you know how sick I was. I was still dazed when they brought him to me. But I took him and held him and opened up his little fists, a finger at a time. And, Bob, he didn't seem possible—I didn't believe he could possibly *be*."

Bob bent down and touched his son. Jamey stirred and smiled faintly.

They stayed by his bedside a moment longer and then left, not wanting to awaken him; they went up to bed.

Chapter 18

JAMEY awoke all at once. The sun was watching him; he could see a slit of its burning brightness under the drawn window shade. He was frightened and tired, but he could not remember what it was that had frightened him. Something had been near him, swooping; if he shut his eyes it might be near him again. He did not want to shut his eyes.

"Merry Christmas, Jamey!"

Nurse Clark was looking down at him, smiling. She was beautiful. He wanted to reach up and to touch her golden hair.

"Is it really Christmas?"

"It's really Christmas."

"And I can get up?"

"You can get up. Just you wait a moment until I find your clothes, and then I'll dress you. You can go upstairs and wake up your mother and your father and your sister."

Jamey watched excitedly as Nurse Clark opened drawers and pulled out his underwear and socks, his shoes and his overalls. Then he saw the stocking hanging from the foot of his crib. It was a long, long stocking, and he could see that it had many things in it.

"What's that?" he asked.

Nurse Clark brought his clothes to him. She undid the top of the stocking and handed it to him. "Santa Claus left this last night for you," she said. "He told me it was from your sister."

Jamey was already busily emptying the stocking. All kinds of little animals were tumbling out on the sheets—animals exactly like the ones Lizbeth had in her room—

every animal she had, including the elephants. Jamey put his hands to his lips and made his loudest trumpeting sound.

Nurse Clark, who was trying to get his legs through the right openings in his overalls, asked. "What was that noise?"

"I don't know," Jamey said. "Unless it was one of the elephants trumpeting. Elephants make a lot of loud noise when they trumpet, don't they?"

"I suppose they do," said Nurse Clark, "although I've never been too close to an elephant."

"I have," said Jamey, allowing a blouse to be slipped over his head. "I stood right next to one with my dad at the circus. I'm not afraid of elephants. The biggest elephant was in the cage beside me at the hospital. I'm not afraid."

"That's right," said Nurse Clark. "Now your shoes and then we'll have a wash. No, not the left foot, the right foot. You don't want to put your left foot in your right shoe on Christmas morning, do you?"

"Is it really Christmas morning?" Jamey asked, on the way into the bathroom. He clutched a glass elephant in each hand, and would not let them go even when Marilyn wanted to wash his hands. "I guess I'll just have to wash two elephants as well as two hands," she said.

"But is it really Christmas?" Jamey asked again.

"Of course it's Christmas. Now, there, even your ears are clean enough. I don't see any reason why you can't run upstairs and wake the family." And she led him to the back stairs so that he would not see the tree, and went up behind him so that if he fell——

Mommy and Dad were in the big bed in the front room. They pretended to be asleep, but Jamey knew better. He jumped upon the bed and began to bounce up and down

upon his father. "Merry Christmas!" he shouted. "Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas!"

Dad came awake at once and seized him in both his hands and held him up high. "Merry Christmas, young fellow—did Santa Claus bring you anything?"

Mommy rolled over and gave him a kiss behind his ear, a soft, blowy kiss of the sort Jamey liked best. "Merry Christmas, darling! Have you seen what Santa left?"

"I brought him upstairs to you first," said a voice from the hall.

"Santa left me a stocking full of elephants and giraffes and tigers and camels and mooses and rhinoceroses and everything," Jamey said. "Santa told Nurse Clark it was from Lizbeth."

"Did you hear that, Liz?" Dad asked as Elizabeth came into the room. Jamey saw that Lizbeth must have been up hours, because she had a dress on and her hair was all combed and she had put on her own shoes. She stood shyly inside the door, nodding her head a single time.

"You children wait outside with Nurse Clark while we get dressed—and then we'll all go downstairs together to see what Santa Claus has brought," Dad said. He ran his fingers through Jamey's hair. "We'll only be a minute, sport."

But it seemed a terribly long time before the door opened and Dad and Mommy came out. Jamey kept asking Nurse Clark questions.

"Is it Christmas all day?"

"Yes, Jamey, it will be Christmas all day."

"Will it be Christmas tomorrow?"

"No, Jamey. Today is Christmas. Tomorrow is a different day. Christmas comes but once a year."

"How long is a year?"

"A very, very long time."

"As long as a day?"

"Much longer."

"As long as a month?"

"Much longer."

"As long as a week?"

Nurse Clark laughed. She was most beautiful when she laughed. "Yes, Jamey, much, much longer than a week."

"It's going to be a long, long time before it's Christmas again?"

"Yes, Jamey, a long time."

Half-way down the stairs, Jamey peeped through the banisters. He saw boxes and boxes and boxes of presents, just piles and piles and piles of them, ten or sixteen or maybe a thousand. He did not see the tree at first, but then Mommy said, "Bob, you forgot to turn on the lights!" Dad had run on down the stairs and flicked the hall switch—and all at once there had been twinkling loops and swirls of lights, little lights and big lights, all sizes and colours, some that winked at Jamey and some that stayed on—and under the lights and in between them was the biggest, tallest, most wonderful Christmas tree Jamey had ever seen.

He ran on down the stairs and into the living-room, then stopped short. He stood looking up at the tree, looking at all the ornaments, the bird with the rainbow tail, the little cat made of cotton that had whiskers you could tweak and that played with a red ball, the shimmering sphere and stars, the Santas going down chimneys, the candy canes, the little glass tubes that bubbled and bubbled—all the things he had seen before on other Christmases and so many he had never even imagined.

Chug—chug—chug! Whooo-whee-hee! Jamey jumped a foot. There, look at that, going around and around at the base of the tree—a real train with cars and cars and

cars. Dad was kneeling beside a funny box, pushing some buttons. "Come over here, Jamey, and I'll show you how it works."

Jamey went over and sat beside his dad. It was nice to sit down because you did not feel the aches so much.

"You see, you push this over this way if you want it to go faster, but you push it this way if you want it to go slower. And when you want it to whistle, you push this button." Dad pushed the little thing that stuck up. The engine came out of the tunnel and went whoo-whee-hee!

"I want to do it," said Jamey.

"Sure," Bob said. "But first let me show you how to make it go backward if you want it to—and how to throw the switches and unload the coal car. Hey!"

The door-bell had rung. Dad stood up, brushing the knees of his trousers. Jamey followed him to the door and watched him open it. Grandma and Dan Eldridge stood outside. Dan had a great big box on his shoulders. He was smiling. He put it down on the porch and held out his hand to Dad. Dan was very out of breath.

"Something for Jamey's Christmas," he said.

Dad picked up the box—Jamey could see from the way Dad had to heave it up on to his shoulder that it was heavy—and carried it inside. Grandma came inside, too, and gave Jamey a hug. But when they turned around, Dan was not there.

They went out on the porch and they saw Dan opening the door of his car. Dad yelled, "Can't you come in for a minute?"

Dan shook his head and waved. He started up the car, and they watched it go along the street until it turned the corner. "He said he had an appointment," Grandma told them.

Dad carried the box into the living-room; it was the biggest box Jamey had ever, ever seen—and he stared at it

with his hands upon his hips. "You don't think it's a piano?" Dad asked.

"Why don't you open it?" Mommy asked, "so I can find out what it is. Then I'll go into the kitchen and make us some breakfast."

"I don't know why I didn't stay here last night," Grandma said. "I feel like I just about turned over before that alarm went off."

"We tried to persuade you to stretch out on the sofa, but you would have none of it," Mommy reminded her.

"I'll have to use the pliers on this," Dad said, standing back from the box. "It's not hemp, but some kind of light wire."

"Were you here last night, Grandma?" Jamey asked.

Grandma dropped her coat and hat on the sofa, right on top of the presents that were piled high there—everywhere that Jamey looked there were presents and presents and presents—and she came over and hugged Jamey. "Grandma's boy was sick last night. He didn't feel so good."

Jamey felt tired again, but he knew if they heard him say it he would have to go to bed. He passed his hand over his eyes.

"The child don't know a thing about it," Grandma said, and she made a clucking noise with her lips.

"It's just as well, don't you think?" said Nurse Clark.

Dad came back into the room with a big pair of pliers. In no time at all he had ripped apart the big box and was pulling out the stringy stuff underneath.

"Don't you get that excelsior on my rug!" cried Mommy.

"Spread out the newspaper," said Grandma, running into the hall and coming back with the paper, kneeling and sticking sheet after sheet of it around the big, queer box.

"Whatever could he have been thinking of to give Jamey a thing like this?" Mommy asked.

Dad did not answer her. He was busy pulling at the big box, grabbing up heaps of the stringy stuff that looked like what fell from his saw down in the basement. And then Jamey saw something sticking out of the box and he knew what it was. He ran over to the huge packing-case and took hold of the long, grey, velvety snout.

"It's an elephant!" he shouted. "A big elephant for me. It is! It is!"

And it was, a big, stuffed elephant with a long trunk and floppy ears—big enough for Jamey to sit on with a place for him to sit that had a roof—a howdah Dad called it.

Dad lifted up Jamey and put him in the howdah and handed him the reins. Jamey pulled on the reins and the stuffed elephant moved his head ponderously back and forth, the great ears wagged, the trunk lifted, and a roguish pink glass eye rolled at Jamey.

"He's real—he's alive!" Jamey cried.

"No, son, he's very lifelike; but he is only a toy," said Dad. He had found an envelope attached to the fringe of the howdah canopy and was slitting it open with his thumbnail.

Mommy came to Dad and put her hand upon his shoulder. "Who sent it, Bob?"

Dad was frowning. Jamey pulled on the reins and shouted, "Look, Mommy, he's almost real." But Mommy was not paying attention. She was reading the card that Dad had given her.

"For Jamey's Christmas from Dan," she read. "Why, Bob, it was sweet of him—but I wish he hadn't."

Dad was pleased. Jamey could see he was. "Maybe he isn't such a bad guy after all," Dad said. "I asked him to come in, but he wouldn't."

Mommy had her arms upon Dad's shoulders and was

looking into his eyes. "He was here, Bob? He brought it himself?" And then they were kissing each other.

Grandma had come to Jamey and was admiring the elephant. She found a crank in the elephant's side and she turned it. Somewhere inside the elephant music began to play, and Grandma, smiling, clapped her hands to it. In a moment Dad and Mommy and then Lizbeth and Nurse Clark were clapping and singing, while Jamey—way up high in the howdah—pulled the reins and made the elephant nod his head and wink his pink glass eye.

"We went to the animal fair,
All the birds and the beasts were there,
And the big baboon, by the light of the moon,
Was combing his auburn hair."

Later, there were many more packages to open, and each one had a surprise. There were books with pictures in them and building blocks—Jamey built a wall around the Christmas tree and a tower that went up and up before it fell over with a ker-bang. Lizbeth found a doll carriage under the tree, and Jamey helped her put her new doll in it and watched her feed the doll. The doll had hair almost the colour of Lizbeth's, and it took a bottle like a real baby and then wet, and you had to change it like a real baby.

"You're the father and I'm the mother," Lizbeth said. "You hold the pins and I'll fold the diaper. But don't you stick him with the pins."

"I wouldn't stick *her*," Jamey said.

"Now she is all clean. You give me the pins."

Jamey gave her the pins. "Is it really Christmas?" he asked.

"Of course it is. Didn't I get a doll and a baby carriage? Don't we have a Christmas tree?"

"But you said it was days and days until the real Christmas," Jamey said.

"That was days and days ago," Lizbeth told him. She was too busy with her new doll to listen to her brother.

Jamey felt the funny pains again, the same pains he had used to have in the hospital. His legs were heavy and he wanted to lie down. "It wasn't so long ago," he said.

"It was days and days."

He thought for a minute. Lizbeth always knew so much more than he did; she was so much bigger. "Is Mommy all better?"

"Of course. There was never anything right or wrong with her. I told Dad, and he said you just misunderstood the doctor."

Grandma came through the door and took Jamey and Lizbeth by the hand. "Breakfast is ready!" she said. "Pancakes and maple syrup and little pig sausages."

It was the breakfast that Jamey liked best of all, but he did not feel like eating it. Lizbeth did not eat much, either. She was so excited that she kept twisting about in her chair, playing with her milk and making funny drumming sounds with her fingers on the underside of the table. More than once, Dad had to ask her to stop.

Grandma and Mommy were talking about a turkey, how big a one they should order and if it came by ten could they have it ready for a late dinner in the afternoon. "If we don't wait for the delivery, we could have it ready by one o'clock. Bob could drive me down to the store."

"I'll be glad to help any way I can," said Nurse Clark.

So it was decided that Dad was to take Grandma to the store. Jamey asked if he could go along, and both Mommy and Dad, frowning, looked at Nurse Clark.

"Dr. Bray said he could do anything a normal boy might today," the nurse said.

"Come along then," Dad said. "But walk quietly and stay close by my side."

It was fine driving in the car and seeing the snow begin to fall—first big, lazy flakes that danced in the wind, then a great, spinning flurry. And it was fun walking into the big store, seeing the people stop to look at him, watching Grandma buy a turkey and cranberries and sweet potatoes and cans of this and that and even nuts and mints.

But Jamey lay down in the back seat of the car on the way home and Dad had to carry him into the house. Nurse Clark said she thought he would be all right if he rested awhile. She took his pulse and put a thermometer in his mouth. "Now you cook that if you can, and I'll be back in a minute." She went out into the hall with his Dad, and Jamey could hear their voices, but he was too tired to listen.

A long, long time later, Nurse Clark took the thermometer, looked at it, shook it and put it in her pocket. "You feel better now, don't you?"

Jamey wanted to feel better. "Can I play some more?"
"If you are sure you feel like it."

He stood and walked over to the pile of unopened presents. It was nice to sit down upon the floor again. He began to tear at the nearest present, watching his hands pulling at the gaudy paper.

"Here let me help you, old fellow," Dad said.

Dad's hands were so much quicker than his own; and the present, when it was open, was a beautiful toy that he could hold to his eye, and when he twisted it around, he saw all the prettiest, skipping and sliding, always changing colours he had ever seen. There were other packages: one contained a drum that hung from his shoulders and two drumsticks—Dad showed him how to go rat-a-tat-tat with the drumsticks, and Lizbeth marched up and down the hall in time to his rhythm. There was a funny old clown who shuffled along on his big tin feet when you wound him up, and a small ferris wheel with little people in it and an

aeroplane that sparkled and buzzed when you pulled it along the floor. One of the large boxes was full of soldiers and horses and cowboys and Indians. And the one Dad had him open next had a real cowboy suit with holsters that had guns in them and a hat with a black-and-white braid.

Jamey found it was easier to sit quietly and let Dad and Grandma and Lizbeth open the presents. It was fun to have them show him how they worked, but he did not want to play with them himself. He wanted to sit and look at the tree and listen and watch the others.

This was Christmas. This was his family. He felt like he could hold them all close to him, shut his eyes and go to sleep and know that they would all be there when he woke up.

They all went into the dining-room and sat around the big table, Jamey right next to Dad. There was a large, brown turkey in front of his father, and there were bowls of cranberries and giblet gravy, mashed and sweet potatoes, corn pudding and lima beans—all the foods Jamey liked best. Dad bowed his head, all of them bowed their heads and closed their eyes, and Dad thanked our Father. Jamey opened his eyes a crack to see if Lizbeth was keeping her eyes shut, and she stuck out her tongue at him.

Just as Dad began to carve, the sound of high-pitched voices, children's voices—like all the elephants trumpeting at once—came into the house. At the same moment Jamey heard feet trampling upon the porch.

Lizbeth began to giggle and her face was red.

"Someone is singing carols," Mommy said.

They all jumped up and ran to the window. Outside on the porch stood a band of children. Each child held a piece of paper in his hand and all of them were singing. A lady stood in front of them waving her hands. "*O little town of Bethlehem—*"

"Miss McIntyre said they were coming and I wasn't to tell!" Lizbeth shouted.

"It's the real Christmas touch," Grandma said.

Mommy went into the kitchen and was busy. But she came out a few minutes later with a plate heaped with cookies, and Grandma followed her with a tray filled with cup after cup of steaming cocoa.

"You folks go on and eat before that good Christmas dinner gets cold," Grandma cried out as she took the cocoa outside to the children.

Jamey ate a little of everything, although he was not hungry. It was warm and good to sit at the big, round table and listen to all the others talk. He was happy.

"It was an awfully nice thing for her to do," Mommy said.

"I guess the whole town knows about Jamey's Christmas," Dad said.

Jamey knew there was something different about him, that it was a special day, even more special than Christmas. He knew there was something they were keeping from him and that something had to do with dying. He knew everybody had to die and that he was going to die, and that this had something to do with it being days and days and days -- the longest, longest time -- before it would be Christmas again. He wished he could understand.

Dad brought in the plum pudding, blazing and smelling in a tingly way that made you want to breathe deep. There was pumpkin pie and there was mince-pie and there was even ice-cream. Jamey had a little of each, and then he felt drowsy.

Dad carried him in to the sofa and covered him with a blanket. He lay gazing at the top of the Christmas tree, at the pretty fairy who perched way up there, standing on tippy-toes. And then the fairy began to dance, turning

"No, 'd about, changing into the most beautiful colours
Jamey the tree seemed to be swaying and the snow was
Christmas' big flakes, falling slowly, dancing with the tree
again. It was, then the flurry, a white curtain, thick and
ever—" and white.

Mommy and
and right as long as he lay still and looked at
half-closed eyes. But if he moved, or
side, the snow thickened, the sounds
around. more distant, he felt as if he were
going on.

He didn't like to keep his eyes open wide, though,
because he couldn't see all his toys and the tree plainly with
them shut tight, could hear his family talking—hear Liz-
beth singing to her doll, hear Mommy and Grandma wash-
ing dishes in the kitchen. And his elephant, his wonderful
big elephant with the floppy ears had come over to keep
him company. He stood there nodding his head and wink-
ing his red eye—it was red now, not pink—bright
red and hot, like the lights, like the fire. And his elephant
was trumpeting, hurting his ears.

"Are you all right, Jamey?" Dad asked.

"Nurse, does he look feverish?"

"He didn't have an elevation before dinner, but we
might as well take it again."

Jamey saw them around him. They were Christmas.
Christmas.

"—the doctor is out, but they are getting in touch
with him—"

"—Jamey and Mommy, Jamey—"

Jamey knew he could be listening to them. There
were so many boxes to open. He had wanted his mommy
to tell him a story. A turkey to eat and nuts and those
little mints that melt in your mouth. The train came out

of the tunnel, chugging and blowing its whistle whee-hee. But the biggest elephant was talking explaining, winking his pink eye.

And then Jamey knew that he had been. He had been too tired and he had lain down gotten all mixed up. But he was all right. At the moment he would sit up and he would look at the boxes.

He did sit up. It was dark and he stood why it was dark. He saw Nurse Clara and she had her book and gave a little cry. She ran out of the room.

He was alone and afraid.

It was dark and he knew that if he looked around he would see the black, swoopy thing that was always right there at the edge of the night. He could feel its wings as they beat the air. He could smell the dust, feel the coldness.

"Mommy!"

"I'm here, Jamey. Right by your side and so is your dad."

"I'm here, Jamey."

He saw them. They had just come in. And he saw the biggest elephant, nodding his head and winking his pink glass eye. He was safe.

"Is it still Christmas?"

He saw Dad glance at Mommy. Mommy shook her head. "Was it a good Christmas, Jamey?"

"It was the best Christmas ever." He was feeling tired again, but there was something else he had to know.

"Will tomorrow be Christmas?"

"No, Jamey."

"When will it be Christmas again, Mommy?"

"Not until next year, a long, long time."

"It won't ever be Christmas again until next year?"

Jamey son.”
Jamey understood it at last. “But it was the best Christmas ever. I don’t care if it isn’t ever Christmas again. It couldn’t ever—never—be a better Christmas—ever—

Mom and Dad did not understand. You could talk an elephant into anything, and they did not understand. But the biggest elephant was nodding his head and flapping his ears. He was wearing his pink glass eye. He understood Jamey went to school in the land of the elephants.

THE END

